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# ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

*by*  
L. A. G. STRONG

With an Introduction by  
MARY SOMERVILLE  
*Director of School Broadcasting*

SECOND EDITION



METHUEN & CO., LTD., LONDON  
36 *Essex Street, Strand, W.C.2*

*First Published* . . . *November 13<sup>th</sup> 1941*  
*Second Edition* . . . *1942*

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN**

## INTRODUCTION

**EACH** of the chapters of this book is based on a talk that was broadcast to schools by the author.

Now in this country broadcasts to schools are not regarded as *lessons*; they supplement the work of the school on the imaginative side. In planning such broadcasts to schools we do not begin with the idea of a syllabus of study; we think first of the children we want to listen, and try to find ways in which broadcasting may legitimately and effectively be brought to enrich their school experience. In this case the special audience was made up of boys and girls who shortly would leave school to start work, for the most part, in an environment unlikely to encourage any interest in good writing or good speech that their studies at school had aroused in them; an environment which indeed is full of influences likely to encourage them in just the opposite direction. Children at this stage are very ready to respect competence in almost any aspect of the business of getting a living which you may care to discuss with them. We wondered how it would affect their attitude to the remainder of the formal teaching they would have in school, if we brought them into touch with a professional writer.

I don't think we could have found a better author than Mr. L. A. G. Strong for our experiment. His broadcasts brought a new element into English periods, for he spoke always as an author who day by day found himself faced with problems of craftsmanship which turned out to be pretty much the same as the problems set at school. Here was a writer whose stories you could read (and whose books had been made into films, too, mark you!), but he had also been a teacher and so had seen the inside of a

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classroom more recently than in those mythical days when he and most grown-up people seem to have been at school. You could trust him to know what the actual problems were for you, and even punctuation took on a new meaning when you heard how it bothered him almost daily in the business of making his living by writing. He didn't swank, either, about being an author, or make out that there was anything specially clever about himself. He insisted, on the contrary, that between your own essay written in school as a task and his essays written in his study for the papers, there wasn't any difference to speak of, except of course for the effect of some extra years of practice and self-criticism, and enjoying the work.

What will come of the rub that these boys and girls in the listening schools have had, through broadcasting, with the personality of this sensitive, sensible writer, it is impossible even for their teachers to say, though a teacher has made the selection of broadcasts published in this book, choosing those which he thought had directly influenced both the work of his pupils and their attitude to English. The effect of the broadcasts will probably be noted only by individual listeners, perhaps years from now, when their memories prompt them to attribute their awareness of some excellence, or absence of excellence, in something they are reading or writing or hearing, to what was said to them by that chap what's his name, whom they liked on the wireless at school. It might be that sketch that he gave one day of the rigmarole his grandmother produced when she tried to tell what Rathbone, the carpenter, had said about coming to mend the leg of his grandfather's favourite chair, and you just couldn't get her to come to the point. It might be what he told us about the story he wrote that was returned by the editor but sold at first go when he cut it down from 5,000 words to 3,000. It might be what he said about Mr. Churchill being a bit like Dr. Johnson; it made you sit up every time you heard the Prime Minister afterwards.

## INTRODUCTION

There are dozens of such instances to be found in the pages that follow—bits of experience which I imagine are just as likely to fire the imagination of students of English and their teachers when they find them safely caught in the printed page as when they came through the classroom loudspeaker. They seem, at least to me, to have lost none of their power to illuminate, as first hand experience imaginatively selected always illuminates, the common stuff of lessons in English. My purpose in stressing their origin is to explain why that modest man, their author, has drawn so largely upon his personal experience as a writer in these pages, and to show in short that their autobiographical character was forced upon him by a B.B.C. taskmistress,

MARY SOMERVILLE

*Director of School Broadcasting*



## PREFACE

SINCE I have been broadcasting to Schools, a great number of letters have come, from adult listeners and from schools, asking that the talks be reprinted in book form.

It has not been possible to reprint them all, nor indeed to reprint any exactly as it stood, since there is a great difference between the spoken and the written word. But the following pages contain the gist of the talks which seemed most suitable for inclusion.

In choosing them, we have let ourselves be guided almost entirely by listeners' choice—except for one subject. The greatest amount of letters have been provoked by the talks on poetry. Since, however, it is useless to print the talks without the poems, and the necessary copyright fees would more than double the cost of each copy of the book, I have been able to include parts of two talks only on this subject.

I hope that the many listeners who have written of their wish to continue their school acquaintance with English, and those who confessed that the idea of getting pleasure from English was new to them, will not be disappointed by what follows. The book is meant for readers of all ages, those at school and those long past school: and I hope that the latter will forgive the short lists of questions included, at the request of many teachers, for the benefit of the former.

L. A. G. S.

Sept. 1941





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## CHAPTER I

### WHAT IS ENGLISH?

WHEN I went to school, and indeed when I first began to teach, English was regarded as the least important "subject" on the time-table. Very little time was given to it, and the youngest and least competent teachers were thought good enough to "teach" it.

"What shall we do with this new man? He's no good at Classics, he speaks hardly any French, and he doesn't know any Maths."

"Oh—put him on to English."

So, when at the age of twenty-one, I joined the staff of a famous preparatory school, I was put on to "teach" English. I was not quite hopeless at other subjects, as I had been engaged to teach Classics. But the school counted on winning a number of scholarships each year to the greater public schools, and those public schools had suddenly demanded an ability to write and think in English as well as in Latin, Greek, and French. What is more, one of them had actually penalised a clever boy from the school in question because of his English work. So, in anger and despair of what the world was coming to, the authorities put me in charge of the scholarship work in English, because I appeared to have a taste for books and writing, and, anyway, I could not do much harm.

I had an uphill task, because what was required of the boys in other branches of their work was docility. The ideal was that most idiotic of human transactions, whereby a teacher gives a boy a piece of information, and the boy hands it back without any addition of his own. The boys

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at that school had to be able to reproduce the things they had been taught, in Latin, Greek, French, or in figures. My job was therefore at odds with all the other teaching, since I had somehow to encourage them to think for themselves. I had to find out what they had to say as private individuals, as separate and distinct and unique human beings. I wanted from them, not effort, but relaxation: not rigid discipline, but freedom to think and speak as their nature inclined them. I wanted them to BE THEMSELVES.

And I had to persuade them, not only to be themselves, but to be themselves on paper. I had to get them to think their own thoughts, and then put them down in a form that could interest other people.

I met many obstacles—apart from their natural wish to treat the English hour as a rest cure. When I talked the matter over, the more thoughtful of them said to me something like this:

"That's all very well. But we're still at school. We're young. We're still learning. Some of us don't know enough to interest other people, even if we did manage to get it down on paper."

## (II)

That brings us to the heart of the whole business. Everyone has something which is interesting to other people: that is, himself. For years, schools have gone wrong by looking on English as a subject. English is not a subject. *English is everything.*

For us who speak English, English is everything. English is what we say and what we think. English is our relationship to other people, our friendships, our truth and untruth, our characters.

How do other people know you? They know you by what you say and do. How do they know what you want, what you like, what you hope for? They can only know from what you tell them and from what they can guess

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about you—all of it in English. English is the stuff of our most private thoughts.

Think of something for a moment. Think of something you would like to happen to-morrow. Think, while I count three. One, two, three. Now—what did you think? Look at it in your mind. Say it to yourself. What language are the words in?

(English is not a subject. English is our life. English is what you and I use in order to think, to speak, and to show other people what we think, and what sort of people we are.) If we cannot use our own language: (if our choice of words is weak and wobbly: if we cannot say what we mean: then we are very badly handicapped in life. We are handicapped not only in our work and our career, but in all our dealings with other people—even in our friendships. And if we take no interest in books and newspapers, if we never read decent English—by which I mean English that knows what it wants to do and does it efficiently—then we are making ourselves do without the best and easiest and simplest way of improving our own English.)

(So, when you hear anyone say, “I’m no good at English,” what he or she really means is, not “I’m no good at one of the subjects they try, or used to try, to teach me at school”, but “I’m no good at thinking straight, I can’t talk sense. I’m no good at being myself.”)

Honestly, that is not putting it too high: for, however much you may be yourself *inside* yourself, it will not do you much good if no one else knows about it: and they will not be able to know, unless you can tell them.

That is the general belief on which all my talks to schools have been based—that English is not just a subject, but the expression of our life as English people.

### III

If this is true, it is tremendously important to have a grip of English, and to be able to use it decently. If you

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cannot use it decently, two things will happen. (You will not be able to express yourself properly to other people. And, when I say express yourself, I mean your *self*, quite literally. You will not be able to explain your own real self to other people as fully as you want to, so that they can understand you. And, even worse, you will not be able to think straight. If you hold on the words you think with is not firm, your thinking will not be firm either. You will not be able to reason properly, because the very material of your thoughts will be unsound and wobbly.)

A great and real cause of the troubles we have got into—the human race, I mean, not only those who speak English—is this inability to think straight, to understand, or even to look for, the meaning of the words we use. The thoughtless and mechanical use of words can be a disease that eats into the lives of individuals and of whole nations, destroying their power to think and to see clearly, and leaving them at the mercy of swindlers and lunatics, of advertising quacks and false prophets, of demagogues and dictators.

And the cure lies, not in laborious effort, but in pleasure. Just as English is the stuff of our life, so it can give us our greatest pleasures—if we let it.

## IV

At this point, I may fairly be challenged with a question. It can go like this:

“It’s all very well for you. You’re a writer. English is your bread-and-butter. It’s quite natural for you to like it, and it’s natural, too, for you to make out that it’s important.) Everyone likes to make out that what he works at is important. You’ve got a prejudice in favour of English. We know lots of people, and grand people too, who get on very well without bothering how they talk or what they read. Why should we bother?”

That is a fair and honest question, and it needs an honest answer

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Quite apart from what I've said already, you'll get a great deal more out of life if you do. Somebody comes along to you and says, "I say, there's a wonderful thing in the town, only a couple of miles away, called a cinema"—and tells you all about it.

You say, "I don't care. I'm very happy as I am. We've got a magic lantern in the village hall."

"Get out," they say. "This is much better than a magic lantern." And they go on to tell you about it.

You say, "Why should I bother? I'm very well as I am. Mum and Dad and Uncle Harry have never seen a cinema, and *they* have got on all right."

Progress would be difficult indeed, if every one thought this way. Besides, it is no argument to say you get on all right without something, till you have given it a try. You might get on much better with it.

## V

Let us look at the question in another way. (A lot of excellent people do not care tuppence about English, do not read anything but the papers, or worry how they think. Granted. But—is it admirable just to lack something? If I, for instance, can enjoy music and dancing and swimming, and you can enjoy music and dancing and swimming *plus* cricket, you are one up on me. Your life is that much fuller than mine. You have a source of pleasure which I lack. Am I the better for lacking it?

If I, on the other hand, can enjoy a number of sports and pastimes *plus* poetry, and you can enjoy the sports and pastimes but not the poetry, I am one up on you. I have a source of pleasure which you lack. Are you the better for lacking it?

Or, to look at it in yet another way—a V.C. with one eye may be magnificently brave, the best of good fellows, excellent company at a dinner or a dance: but all his good qualities do not add up to an argument for having only

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one eye. He would be just as brave, just as good a fellow, just as good company, if he had two.

### VI

As for the other point, about my being a writer, and therefore prejudiced in favour of English—why does anyone suppose I became a writer? Simply because I like it. Why do I read what are generally called good books? Because I like them. There is no other reason. I read because I like it. I write because, of the various ways of making a living which I have tried, it is the one I like best. The liking is quite genuine. There is no duty, or superiority, or pretence about it.

In the pages that follow, I want to talk about books and writing. In other words, I want to talk about English; not from the point of view of the grammar book and the exercise book, but from the practical, living point of view. I want to consider different things which increase our enjoyment of books and writing. One chapter will be about making a novel into a film, and I will try to show why there always have to be changes in the story. Another will show how a single incident, something seen or heard in the street or in a shop, can be built up into a short story. I will try to take the reader behind the scenes, and see how writers handle their subjects. We will consider how a broadcast story differs from a story printed in a book. We will examine the difference between a short story and a one-act play, and so on and so forth.

And if the reader protests, and says, "This is all very well for people who want to be writers, but I don't," I shall be unmoved. There is no magic difference between writers and other people. Writing is not a sacred mystery. Anyone who writes a letter or a message is doing what the writer does, that is, communicating a meaning to somebody else. And English is always English.

And it is always more fun to know something about how



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things are done. We cannot watch a game sensibly unless we know something about the rules. We can get much more fun, much more enjoyment, much more profit from our reading and from the films we see, if we have a notion how the thing works. For writing is not a matter of tricks and dodges and gadgets. There are ways of doing things, certainly, just as there are ways of putting colours down on paper and ways of playing a scale: but all these ways, all these devices, all these bits of skill mean nothing at all unless they are inspired by a sincere and honest purpose; the purpose of making something, whether it be a novel, a short story, a film, a play, a poem, something which is true to itself and to the man or woman who writes it: something real, something sincere, something practical, and something very much alive.

## CHAPTER II

### READING FOR PLEASURE

TO my mind, the only sensible reason for reading anything is because we enjoy it or hope to enjoy it. Of course, pleasure covers a whole variety of feelings and shades of feeling. But it is my strongest belief about reading that one should read only what one likes, and because one likes it. I am talking, of course, of our private reading. When we are studying special subjects, or working for examinations, we obviously have to read a good deal that we would not choose to read in other circumstances.

It may seem odd to have to insist that one should only read because one liked it: but people read for such a queer variety of reasons. There are people who read a book, not because they enjoy the book, but because they want to be able to say that they have read it. They want to be in the swim. Ten to one, when they read a book for those reasons, they only skim through it, because all they really want to do is to be able to talk as if they had read it. There are people who set themselves down to read a book because they think it will do them good. They make a duty of it, a kind of penance. Sometimes they go so far as to set themselves so many pages at a time. If it is some kind of technical book, which they are reading in order to improve their knowledge, well and good. But if it is a novel, or a poem, or any part of what we call "English Literature," then the person who is reading it in this way is wasting his or her time.

You cannot take a good book as if it were medicine. It is rude to the book, and very silly from your own point of view. By approaching it in that way, you make sure of

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losing anything it might have to give you. You only begin to get good from a book when your spirit and the book's spirit come together. A book is like a living person. You must meet it as a friend, and actively like it, if any good is to pass between you.

### II

A reason why people at school read books is to please their teacher. The teacher has said that this, that, or the other is a good book, and that it is a sign of good taste to enjoy it. So a number of boys and girls, anxious to please their teacher, get the book and read it. Two or three of them may genuinely like it, for its own sake, and be grateful to the teacher for putting it in their way. But many will not honestly like it, or will persuade themselves that they like it. And that does a great deal of harm. The people who cannot like the book run the risk of two things happening to them: either they are put off the idea of the book—let us suppose the book was *David Copperfield*—either they are put off the idea of classical novels, or they take a dislike to Dickens, and decide firmly never to waste their time on anything of the sort again: or they get a guilty conscience about the whole thing, they feel that they do not like what they ought to like, and that therefore there is something wrong with them.

They are quite mistaken, of course. There is nothing wrong with them. The mistake has all been on the teacher's side. What has happened is that they have been shoved up against a book before they were ready for it. It is like giving a young child food only suitable for an adult. Result, indigestion, violent stomach ache, and a rooted dislike of that article of food for ever more.

Still, I am not sure that even that is not better than the fate of the people who manage to persuade themselves that they enjoy the book. What happens to them is truly terrible. Once they get into the way of this kind of thing,

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they cease to have any taste of their own at all. They do not know what they think. Their real feelings, their real tastes are all stoppered down under this sense of duty, which tells them that whatever Mr. Thingumbob or Miss Whatshername recommends to them is good, and that therefore, of course, they like it.

That has happened to a very great number of men and women of my acquaintance. They do not know what is good; they know only what is supposed to be good. They do not know what they like; they know only what they ought to like. If you show them a book or a picture, if you play them a piece of music or put a record on the gramophone, you see them desperately trying to recognize it if it is music, and looking quickly to see the author's name if it is a book. Because, until they have seen the label, they do not know whether they ought to like it or not. Give them something without a label, and they are lost. They have long been without any power they ever had to judge a thing on its merits.

### III

Now for a question on which people quarrel violently. Does it do any good to advise people to read certain books? What is the effect produced when a teacher or anybody else says, "You *ought* to read *Vanity Fair*, or *The Old Curiosity Shop*," or whatever the name of the book may be? Does it make the average person want to read the book, or does it put him or her right off?

The answer will depend, in the first place, upon the person who gives the advice, and, in the second place, upon the person to whom the advice is given. It is not a subject upon which one can lay down the law, one way or another; and I cannot pretend to do more than give my own beliefs.

I do, however, remember very clearly my own experiences and my own reading, from a very early age. You

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may, or may not, be like me—but I confess that, in the matter of reading, at any rate, I have always been a bit contrary. I have always preferred to go my own way.

When I was a very small boy, my ankles were weak, and I was slow in learning to walk. As a result, I learned to read sooner than most children. My grandmother used to read a great deal to me—school stories, all very virtuous, where the hero and his favourite teacher were incredibly brave, and the bad lad was terribly bad, and came to an edifying end in the last chapter but one. From these stories we came to *Eric, or Little by Little*, and *St. Winifred's*, which were similar in moral tone, but much better written.

As I grew older, and chose my own reading, I rushed to comic papers and penny bloods. The youth of to-day can have no idea what a wonderful period that was for penny bloods. There were school stories, the *Gem*, and the *Magnet*, all about Tom Merry and Harry Wharton and Billy Bunter and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. They continued to appear till quite recently: I heard with sorrow that the war had stopped them, and look forward to their rebirth. But there were scores of others which nobody can have the fun of reading to-day. There was the *Dick Turpin* library, four numbers a month, coloured cover, twenty-four pages, costing only a penny, all about the exploits, quite imaginary, of the notorious highwayman and his gang of desperadoes. There was the *Claude Duval* library, the hero of which was another, earlier highwayman, celebrated for his gallantry to ladies. There was the *Jack Sheppard* library, given up to the adventures of a rather unsavoury little man who was chiefly famous for his skill at getting out of prisons. The *Robin Hood* library was all about the outlaws of Sherwood Forest: the *Buffalo Bill* library was the ancestor of all the Westerns and cowboy thrillers: the *Rob Roy* library did the same for Scotland: and there were many more. If you liked detective stories, there was *Seaton Blake*. It was the golden age of thrillers,

and I read them all. I have got some still in my bookcase. Only a few; but I treasure them.

#### IV

Some good people, when they saw me reading these in the train on my way to school, would shake their heads, and say they wondered my parents allowed it. But my father, a man of great sympathy and good sense, took a wise and tolerant view. He argued that, if I had any sense, I would grow out of this type of reading: if I had not, it did not matter what I read, as I should be a fool anyway.

Besides, he argued, if he forbade me to read these things, I should want to read them all the more, because they would have the charm of being illegal. He was proved right on that point. Once my mother and grandmother, horrified by a particularly lurid picture on the cover of one of my *Claude Duval* books, told me to tear it up. I could not bear to do this, so I hid it under a loose board in my grandmother's summer-house, where it stayed for two or three years, and received many secret and guilty readings it would never have had otherwise: for my father was right on the other point too. I had grown out of my taste for highwaymen, and gone on to other books. But this forbidden book lasted longer than all the rest, because it was forbidden.

I have never regretted my penny-dreadful period. Indeed, I owed my *Jack Sheppard* library the discovery of one good writer at least. That was Harrison Ainsworth, whose novel about Jack Sheppard I found in my boarding-school library during my first few days there, and jumped to it with a homesick thrill. I liked it, and proceeded to read all the other Harrison Ainsworths I could find.

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### V

Besides penny bloods, I read other stories of adventure: and, as I grew a little older, I began to realize that they were better written than the penny bloods. They were not less exciting: they were more exciting. *Under the Red Robe*, by Stanley Weyman, which was read to us at school, was better value than *Claude Duval*. Sherlock Holmes was better value than Sexton Blake: more exciting, more satisfying. I could believe in him better: the people he met were more like real people. Then my favourite magazine, *The Captain*, began to print school stories by a new writer called P. G. Wodehouse: and they were better than the adventures of Tom Merry, of Harry Wharton and Co. They were funnier, and they were more like real school. Then, when I was getting better from measles, my father read me some of W. W. Jacobs's stories. I laughed till I nearly fell out of bed, and from that day always read everything by Jacobs that I could find.

One day, at school, an older boy said to me, "If you like Jacobs, you'd like Dickens." I was very suspicious, but I tried one at last: and then I read ten of Dickens all in a row.

At my first school, we read Shakespeare plays with a teacher who made them very interesting indeed. The first time I came to London on a visit with my father, in 1907, I gave him no peace till he took me to see Sir Herbert Tree in *The Merchant of Venice*, the play we were reading at the time. Later, when the Benson company came to Plymouth, I went every night for a whole week, reading the play by day, and seeing it in the evening. After that, I got hold of all the plays I could lay hands on by the other playwrights of Shakespeare's time. (I confess that one of the reasons I liked them was that they sometimes dealt with things I was not supposed to know about: but that was not the only reason.) I read all sorts and conditions of

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things, as I do to-day, for one reason, and one reason only: because I liked them.

There were poems that I liked, too: and when I say liked, I mean liked. That same English teacher I mentioned just now used to read poetry to us, and encourage us to read it for ourselves. She was very tactful about it. She did not ram things down our throats, or insist that we must like what she liked. She encouraged us to discuss the poems, and say if we liked them or disliked them.

I was young enough not to have any prejudice against poetry. Very few people have, if no one puts them off it either by forcing it on them, or making them learn it by heart before they want to, or if they do not hear older boys and girls laughing and suggesting that it is sissy or high-brow to enjoy poetry. I do not see why anyone should read poetry who does not like it. Thank heaven, we are none of us under any obligation to read anything. But a good many people will not give poetry a fair try, or let themselves enjoy it. I took it as it came, when I was a boy, and I have had pleasure and good from it ever since. When I sat in a classroom and heard these lines, from Tennyson's *Ulysses*—where the old seafarer and explorer calls his old comrades together, and suggests they go for a last voyage before they die:

Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.  
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:  
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.  
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew. . . .



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When I heard that, I knew I had found something that mattered to me: and it has mattered to me ever since.

### VII

The books and plays and poems to which I was introduced by this schoolmistress I liked in exactly the same way as I used to like the penny bloods: that is to say, I enjoyed reading them, or hearing them read, because they interested me. I read them for pleasure. At that school, owing to the sense and understanding of this schoolmistress, there was no nonsense about its being priggish or sissy to like good books. We only knew a book was good because we liked it. We did not know, for instance, that *David Copperfield* was an English classic. We only knew that one day the schoolmistress brought a copy into class, and made us start reading aloud about David going to church on Sunday morning, and about his visit to the upturned boat at Yarmouth, in which the Peggottys lived. These things delighted us and made us laugh, and so we thought that *David Copperfield* was a good book, and enjoyed it, in just the same way as we were enjoying P. G. Wodehouse's school stories in *The Captain*.

And that, beyond all possible doubt, is the way to go at your reading: to enjoy it, and to read because you enjoy it, and not to read anything that bores you, because that makes it even less likely that you will enjoy it later on. It is, first of all, a question of age, of the stage in one's growing up which one has reached. (I mean mental rather than physical age.) My friends and I used to read the *Dick Turpins* and *Jack Sheppards* because we were in a stage when violent and bloodthirsty adventures were all we wanted. Later on, when we had grown out of that stage, these stories no longer satisfied us. We had grown out of them, just as we had earlier grown out of stories about teddy bears and fairies and Jemima Puddleduck. Nearly everyone likes an adventure story sometimes, and

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nearly everyone has a touch of bloodthirstiness in his make-up—witness the thrillers and detective stories that are written for grown-up readers. But they will not do for our only article of diet—unless, for one reason or another, our development has stopped, and we remain at the mental age when such things are all we want. Normally, no one wants to feed all the time off one dish only. It gets monotonous, and we want a change.

But—and this is where the opposite school of thought comes in, the formidable number of teachers and others who hold a different opinion—but, say these teachers, the hard fact is that, as you have admitted a moment ago, quite a number of people never grow out of the penny-dreadful, gangster-thriller stage of reading, and cannot read anything else. (That is, if you leave them to themselves.)

“You’re assuming,” one of these people said to me, “you’re assuming that everyone has naturally good taste, and will pass on from this sort of reading to other sorts, as long as he’s not interfered with. It isn’t true, because a great many won’t ever find out that there *are* other sorts of reading. They know what they like, and they stick to it. Unless, at some stage in their growth, preferably early, someone takes them by the scruff of the neck and compels them to read good books, there they stop.”

Well—it all depends on the view you take of teaching and what it should be. Personally, I dislike from my soul this assumption, *in cultural matters*, that we have a right to take anyone by the scruff of the neck and compel him to read anything he doesn’t want to. I believe and maintain that no sane person reads except for pleasure. If people wish to stay at an elementary stage in reading, let them. I do not see why anybody should not read what he likes, nor why anybody should read what he does not like. I believe that all a teacher may legitimately do is try to show him how much more pleasure he might get from a wider range of reading.

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The real point about reading good books, well written books, true books, is that, once you are able to enjoy them, they give you *more* pleasure than the books that are less good, less well written, and less true. The only reason I ever read a book—in my spare time, that is to say—is because I expect pleasure from it. If I like it, I go on. If it bores me, I stop. No one can bully me into liking what I do not like, and I should never, never try to bully anyone else into liking what he did not like.

### VIII

What are we to do, then, about this problem of getting people who are stuck in the early gangster, penny-blood style of reading, to realize that they will get just as much fun, more fun, out of better books?

Here again, the answer will depend on each of the people concerned, since, fortunately for the world, no two people are quite alike. What I used to do when I was teaching was, as soon as I had found out what sort a boy was, to read aloud a bit of something better than what he was reading, *but of the same type*. Then, when he sat up and took notice—and I never, in twelve years' teaching, found any boy who did not—I would lend him the book. Of course, when one is teaching a class, one cannot do that for each individual boy. One has to work on a hit-and-miss principle. But, somehow, before very long, one can find at least one thing that makes this or that boy sit up and take notice.

My plan, then, always has been to offer classes and separate people samples from various books, so that they could see whether the book was one that interested them, one which they would like to read for themselves. I never believed in recommending a book, lest one of two things might happen. If the boy liked me, and thought I was a reasonably sensible sort of person, he might read the book, thinking he *ought* to like it, either because I liked it, or to

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please me; and so persuade himself that he liked it, with the result that, as in the case of the people we discussed in the last chapter, his taste would not be his own. Or, if the boy did not like me, and had a low opinion of my intelligence, he might be put off the book on my account. All I wanted as a teacher, and all I want as a writer, is that people should read what they honestly enjoy, and should honestly enjoy what they read: that they should read for pleasure, and nothing else.

### CHAPTER III

## THE TWO WORLDS

SIR JAMES JEANS, the scientist, not long ago wrote a book in which he discussed science and music. In the course of this book he said one thing which was of particular interest to all artists, whether their art was music, writing, or painting. He said that science could not give us any account or explanation of the quality of a piece of music. For instance, if you were to take a piece of music written by, let us say, Johann Sebastian Bach—that is, the famous Bach: and if you were also to take a piece of music similar in form which belonged to the same period, one admittedly was of lower musical value: and if you were then to examine both pieces of music by every device known to science, you could not get any result that would tell you that one piece was better than the other.

You could get an analysis in great detail of the different ways in which the notes were combined and arranged. You could get the fullest account of the ways in which they were combined with silence—for music is not only sound, but sound arranged in relation to silence. Yet none of these accounts would give you any clue, would help you in any way to realize that, whereas the piece by Bach was good music, the piece by the other composer was not. In other words, science, as such, is unable to distinguish between good music and bad. It can describe the arrangement of the music, but it has nothing to say about its meaning. And yet any person with musical taste can distinguish at once the good piece from the bad.

## II

Of course, this statement is not a discovery of Sir James Jeans's alone. But it has extra importance as coming from a scientist. Not many scientists have known or cared enough about music to be fully qualified to make such a statement. And not many musicians or artists of other kinds have known enough about science to be qualified to make it either. There *was* a scientist who was also a good musician, by name J. W. N. Sullivan. He wrote an excellent short book on Beethoven—one of the best books I have ever read about a musician. Sullivan pointed out, in another of his books, that science could never tell one the *quality* of any work of art. Science, he said, was limited to describing things. It could, so to speak, give you the exact measurements of a man's body, it could describe him from the point of view of chemistry, of energy, of heat, light, and goodness knows what else, but it gave you no account of his quality, that is, his personal character. It was limited to description only.

## III

Why is this? Why cannot science tell us all about human beings or works of art?

It cannot tell us all about these things because quality, whether personal or artistic, belongs to another world, which we may call the world of values. A very simple illustration will show the difference between the material world, which science can measure, and the world of values, which it cannot measure.

A woman has a little, clumsy, carved wooden figure, supposed to represent a dog. It is crudely coloured with paint. It is very shabby and dirty. It was made for her and given her by her little son, who is dead.

Now, in the material world, the world which science can

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measure, that crude little wooden carved thing is worth nothing at all. No one would give a halfpenny for it. Science would accurately describe it, analyse the paint upon it, tell us what sort of wood it was made of, and so on and so forth. The little wooden object is worth nothing in the material world.

Yet, to the mother who owns it, it is the most precious thing she has. It means so much to her that she would not sell it for anything in the world. It has for her a value which has got nothing whatever to do with its price in the material world which is measured by science.

In other words, this world of values, this other world, is one in which our feelings are concerned. It is a world which we enter through music, through writing, through painting, through religion, through anything which moves our feelings and touches our inmost lives. It is in this other world that quality is measured: this second world, so hard to describe, a world of which we can make no map, but which we can recognize when we are privileged for a moment to step into it.

## IV

Now a great many people find life easier if they can deny that there is such another world as this world of values. They cannot deny it altogether: that would make them inhuman. But they can laugh at it, they can discredit it, they can suggest that it is an unpractical, foolish, sloppy sort of thing to want to enter this world, or have anything to do with it. They can suggest that it is sloppy to care for music or books or painting, and that the only world worth troubling about is the ordinary, everyday, material world—which is measured by science.

It is quite possible to live one's life with only the slightest regard for the world of values—though anyone who is sufficiently human to feel affection for people or places must know something of this world, whether he admits it

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or not, since that affection can seldom be measured in scientific terms. You cannot measure the value of a place you love, or a person you love, in terms of the table of weights and measures, or in pounds, shillings, and pence. Nor will it help you very much to talk about atoms and electrons and mathematical formulae. Anyone who cuts himself off from all forms of art, from books and music and painting, is doing without the best keys to the door of this world of values. He is depriving his life of many chances of strength and help and happiness. He is starving a part of his nature.

For we all have, to a greater or less extent, the power to enter this world of values and be strengthened by it. It is not a question of being clever or superior. It is a question simply of seeing that the quality of life is a different thing from its quantity, and from the mechanical and material and scientific means by which that quantity can be determined.

### V

Think of the little wooden carving. It exists in both worlds. It has its scientific existence, its material existence in the ordinary world, carved crudely to represent a dog and smeared with water-colour paint, most of which has been rubbed off. It has its other existence in the other world, the world of values, as something upon which loving care and pains were spent, and which stands for things too personal and too sacred to talk about. Which is its *real* value?

That is a question which will be answered in very different ways, according to the point of view. For the mother, its real value is the value it has for her. For the stranger, its real value is the value of a little, dirty, shapeless piece of wood.

The true answer, of course, is that both are real. There are times when the outer world, the material world, is more



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real to us. The point is that we belong to both worlds, and must never forget that fact. If we think of ourselves as belonging only to the world of values and living in it, we shall get out of touch with the everyday world, and make fools of ourselves. If we think of ourselves as only belonging to the everyday world, we shall get out of touch with some of our best qualities and have no means of reaching the things which nourish them.

### VI

Why is it, do you suppose, that some books and paintings and pieces of music have lasted for hundreds of years? The time in which they were made, the particular world which gave birth to them, has passed away long ago. The books no longer describe the world we know. The paintings no longer represent anything in our world. The music does not employ the instruments of the modern orchestra, and the spinets and the clavichords and the recorders for which it was written are now only curiosities in a museum, except where they are produced for a special, antique effect.

How is it, then, that these bygone works of art still live?

The reason that they still live is that they are real in the world of values. Long though the people for whom they were made are dead, they still appeal to the feelings of people alive to-day. The pictures are still beautiful. The books still move our hearts. The music still says something which we can recognize, and to which we can answer. These things last, because they live in the world of values. There are Greek and Latin poems which we can recognize as beautiful to-day. In some ways, the ancient Greeks reached a point in art which nobody has touched since. And these things are not lost. Although the outer world in which they were born has vanished more than two thousand years, they live in the world of values, which is independent of time.

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We have to live in both worlds. That is our job here on earth, as far as we can understand it. And the best way in which to keep in touch with the world of values is to keep in touch with and increase our understanding of those things which give us a passport to it: good music, good painting, and good books.

At present, our concern is with books.

## CHAPTER IV

### WHAT USE ARE BOOKS?

WHAT use *are* books? What do they do for us? How much worse off would we be if they were all destroyed?

I am not speaking now of text-books, of books on science, medicine, engineering, or technical books which give us the information which we need for the conduct of life. I am speaking of those books whose value is only artistic: of books which do not help us to build houses, or to lay drains, or to calculate the stresses in building a bridge, or tell us how to combine chemicals for particular purposes: of books which give us no practical information whatever.

How much worse off would we be if we had no Chaucer, no Shakespeare, no Plato, no Virgil, no Homer? Would we be any worse off practically?

## II

A lot of people will tell you that we would not. A lot of people will tell you that if all art ceased to exist, the world would get on just as well without it. What they mean is that *they* would get on just as well without it: but people who hold this view are seldom too particular as to the way in which they express it. These people look on art of all kinds, of the very best, as a recreation, something which a practical man can regard indulgently and smile at, or perhaps even take a little pleasure in, just as he would regard the antics of a child.

In the last chapter, we looked for a while at the difference between the material world, the ordinary, everyday, practical world of laying drains and building bridges and

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buying things at the grocer's and tripping over footstools, and the world of values, the world in which things exist by right of what they do to our feelings and our thoughts. We came to the conclusion that works of art, or, at any rate, the quality of works of art, their essence, belonged to this world of values rather than to the everyday world.

This would mean, if it were true, that if all books were to be destroyed, except the technical books we mentioned just now, then the loss would be a loss to the world of values, that other world of feeling and imagination, which, as we have seen, a number of people try to ignore and do without.

I think we could best imagine the loss that would come to us from the destruction of books, of stories and poetry, of novels and plays, if we shifted over for a moment to consider what would happen in the practical world if all the technical books, all the text-books, were destroyed—the books of engineering, of medicine, of science. What would happen if all of them were suddenly taken away? Or, worse still, what would happen if for some time now there had not been any?

The result would be that each new generation of men would have to start all over again, except for such advice and experience as their parents and grandparents could hand on to them by word of mouth. Man's only storehouse of information would be memory.

### III

Now, no memory, even the greatest, can contain more than a tiny fraction of all that is known about any one subject. Thus, for instance, doctors would be terribly poor of knowledge. Instead of having the whole vast treasure of the medical experience of generations, now happily preserved in books, they would have to begin right at the beginning, with only a few scraps of old men's wis-

## WHAT USE ARE BOOKS?

dom to help them. Instead of being able to begin where the last generation left off, which is what happens now, the healer in a bookless world would have hardly anything but himself to rely on. Almost worse, he would have no method of handing on what he knew, except by telling it by word of mouth to people who would probably forget the greater part of it.

Without their text-books, the engineers would know no more than the first men who laboriously built a hut, the chemists would know next to nothing, the ship-builders would still be hollowing out logs, or blowing up goat-skins. In fact, we should be a race of savages.

## IV

In the same way, if all the other kinds of books were destroyed, all the novels, all the poems, all the plays, all books of every kind except the technical books, we should be just as poor in the world of values. We should be savages in that other world. It is not for nothing that the Nazis have burnt so many books. They have all their technical books, their books on engineering and everything else. The books they have been destroying are books of the other kind: books, which, if they once faced them honestly and read them, must condemn so much that they are doing.

For these books, the books which belong to the world of values, contain the record, not of what men have found out and learned about *things*, but what they have found out and learned about their inmost selves. Not about their bodies, but about their real selves, their feelings, their emotions, their hopes, their fears, their sense of beauty, their religion, everything which gives life its finer shades, everything which belongs to that inner world of values.

For the history of man is not only a history of battles against nature, and of victories over things. It is a history of man's battle with himself, and of his victory over

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himself. And that inner history has no text-book in the ordinary sense. Its records are only to be found in works of the imagination; in literature, in music and painting, and those of the more practical arts which these things and the world from which they come have inspired.

No mere study of engineering and building could create Winchester Cathedral. Faith and a sense of beauty played as much part there as the technical knowledge how to build an arch or support a roof. And that faith, that sense of beauty, comes from the world of values, whose record is in books and works of art.

## V

It is in books that we find the story of what men and women have felt and hoped and believed and suffered and mourned and laughed at. It is in books that we learn what those who went before us felt to be noble and looked upon as base. And, reading an imaginative record of their lives, we see how near they are to us. We reach across the centuries and recognize our brothers and our sisters. When we read the literature of ancient Greece, when we hear the discussions which Socrates had with his friends two thousand five hundred years ago, that great gap of time disappears, and we see, with astonishment and reverence and delight, people of like feeling with ourselves. We see that men thought the same things noble and the same things base, and that they were as ready then as now to die for what they believed.

## VI

It is not only the big things, either. We find, when we look back through the centuries, that the little things of life, the small annoyances and pleasures, the household accidents, have always been the same. The jokes in the comic plays of Aristophanes, written two thousand five

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hundred years ago, would many of them make an audience laugh to-day. Men were bothered by the same things, parents fussed as they do to-day, children played the same tricks. The language and the costumes were different, but that was all.

## VII

Is there any importance in these things? What does it matter to us that people behaved in the same way all that time ago? What good does it do us to know about them?

That is a question that cannot be answered in terms of the material world. You cannot translate values into prices. But when we read such things as the lines taken from a collection called *The Greek Anthology*, lines written by a father on the death of his twelve-year-old boy: when we read in the same Anthology about the little slave child, aged two, who fell off the ladder, and, as he died, raised his tiny arms to his master to be picked up and comforted: and when, two thousand years later, we read how Juliet's nurse came back from the errand upon which she had been sent, and was too much concerned with her troublesome journey to give Juliet the news of Romeo which she was longing to hear: when we read things like this, which are real and true, something happens which I cannot describe, and which you, if you are lucky enough to experience it, will not be able to describe either.

Let us say that this realization that the things we feel ourselves have been felt long, long before us—that we have, so to speak, friends all through human history, recognizable friends, of whom we can say, "But that's just how I feel!" or "That happened to me only yesterday"—this discovery has a value which cannot be reckoned in terms of pounds, shillings, and pence, which we cannot enter in any account-book, but which is real, and which has a strange influence on our growth as human beings,

## VIII

Another point, and a very important one, about the modern world. I believe, and I think that many people will agree, that books—novels, short stories, plays, poems—have a great part to play in making us understand the people of other nations, and making them understand us. As to the need for such understanding, I obviously need say nothing. The history of the last few years says it loudly and clearly enough. Novels and stories which honestly reflect the character of the people about whom they are written are perhaps the best ambassadors that a country can have.

Foreigners are apt to seem so strange. We go to their countries, and we watch them, and we think how queer they are. They have dinner at such a funny time, and they eat such strange things at it. They drive their cars on the opposite side of the street. They wear funny hats. Their railway stations are not like ours, their trams are extraordinary, and we cannot make the bed-clothes stay on the bed. In fact, all we really notice are the differences between ourselves and them.

But, when we read their novels, their short stories, and their plays, we make an astonishing discovery. These people who behave so oddly feel as we do. They hope for the same things, the same things hurt their feelings, they love in the same way, they suffer disappointment, jealousy, fear, they respond as we do to kindness and friendliness, and, like ourselves, they are timid and afraid that other people are better than they.

And, when we discover this, we feel a rush of relief, and our hearts are warm towards them because of all the things which we and they have in common.

Is *that* what you feel, man with the queer suit whom I saw in the tram?

Do you really have the same kind of troubles at home as I have, woman with the funny hat?



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please me; and so persuade himself that he liked it, with the result that, as in the case of the people we discussed in the last chapter, his taste would not be his own. Or, if the boy did not like me, and had a low opinion of my intelligence, he might be put off the book on my account. All I wanted as a teacher, and all I want as a writer, is that people should read what they honestly enjoy, and should honestly enjoy what they read: that they should read for pleasure, and nothing else.

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And do you play with the same things that we do, you little boy and girl in the odd clothes?

And they say in return, Do you then do the same things that we do, and feel as we do?—adding whatever comment they choose to make about the queerness of our arrangements, as it seems to them.

And so we are brought close to them; brought close, not by the hard facts of the outside world, because it is in those facts that people of other nations are different from us; but by things in the world of values, the things we feel, the things we think beautiful and good or ugly and bad, by the facts of our own inward selves. Those are the things which books record, and have to give us. And it is in the keeping of that record that books have their value.

## CHAPTER V

### WRITING FOR PLEASURE

HOW would you like to earn your living by doing the thing you want to do most? How would you like your work to be the thing you most enjoy, so that work was pleasure? I do not mean anything smug or offensive, like the advice of those persons who tell us that we ought to take a pleasure in our work. I mean, quite honestly and literally what I say. How would you like it if someone took the thing you like doing best, and told you that in future that thing was to be your work?

I ask, because that is what happened to me. I am one of the few lucky people who does what he likes for a living. We have been talking about reading for pleasure. I write for pleasure—and earn my living by it.

I am one of the few lucky people, because too many of us have to earn our living by doing jobs we do not like. In order to have a roof over their heads and put food in their mouths, millions of people have to spend most of their waking hours working at something that does not interest them: something they would never do if they were not compelled. Whereas I should write, even if I did not get my living from it. Not as much, nor as often, nor about so many things. But I should write.

## II

You would be unwise to assume, because I am doing what I want to do, that mine or any other writer's life is all jam, all fun, all play. It is one thing to say that one likes writing in one's own time, and when one pleases. It

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is quite another to be a professional writer, who often has to write at other people's time, and when other people please.

Being a writer is not unlike being a doctor. Many of us would like to be doctors if we could choose the times when our patients were to be ill, and could arrange that no one should be ill when we went on a holiday. But, unfortunately, people get ill at all sorts of inconvenient times, and the poor doctor has to turn out at half-past two in the morning, or has to drive twice in the day to the same out-of-the-way village because the second lot of people had not the consideration to call him earlier in the day, or has to put off his holiday because a patient who is depending on him has something to face which cannot be put off.

In the same way, a writer will get asked for things at short notice, half a dozen of them at once: and the greater his reputation for punctuality and for being able to do things in a hurry, the more of this emergency work will come his way.

### III

Besides this question of time and convenience, there are others, in which I personally have been fortunate. I have never had to write things I did not believe in. I have never been compelled to turn out work that was shoddy or careless. For anything of that kind I have done, I have no excuse. It may have been poor, but it was the best I could do at the time. Even so, anyone who writes for a living will in the nature of things do work which he would not do if he were not paid for it.

Not all subjects are equally interesting. The professional writer cannot always choose his subject. An editor will ring up and ask for an article on gardening, or squirrels, or preparatory schools, or the Poet Laureate. I know nothing about gardening, very little about squirrels, quite a bit about preparatory schools, and not too much about

the Poet Laureate. What I know or do not know does not much matter. A practised writer should be able to write about anything. What matters more is that—to put it mildly—I may not be equally interested in all these subjects. I may prefer writing about squirrels to writing about the Poet Laureate. But it is my business to be ready to write about any of these subjects: and it is the measure of a writer's capacity to be able to make a good job of what does not particularly interest him.

As has been said of acting, the mark of a good professional is to be able to give a good performance when he does not feel like it. The amateur may be brilliant on his day, but he varies. One day he gives a ninety-five per cent performance: the next day, when he feels off colour, he drops to eighty-five per cent. The professional, on the other hand, will not vary by more than two or three per cent, whatever he feels like, because he has the technique. He knows his job.

In the same way, the writer who knows his job, who has a good solid technique at his command, can turn his hand to almost anything, and be interesting about it. So, from the start, I have always tried to tackle any job I was offered, in the hope of getting a good technique: of learning my job.

## IV

Of course, there are exceptions. If, for instance, the editor of a scientific periodical about aeroplanes were suddenly to go mad and ask me to write an article upon the latest developments in flying, I should at once point out his mistake. I should not take his money on false pretences, and I should not want to make a fool of myself.

Similarly, I have several times refused to criticize a book I was not qualified to write about, because it would not be fair to the author to have his work criticized by someone who was unable to do it justice.

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Otherwise, I open my mouth wide, like a small bird in a nest, for all the work I can get. And I enjoy the work. I write for pleasure.

### V

The pleasure began in the nursery, and continued when I was at school. It was intermittent at school, because I had to write a great many things that did not interest me. I liked writing essays.

Not all essays. I hated essays like debates, where you put down the arguments on one side, and those on the other, and summed up at the end. I could write them, and get good marks for them, but they bored me, and I thought they were silly.

And I hated, oh, how I hated being told what to say and how to say it! I took no pleasure at all in reproducing something I had been told. What I enjoyed was writing something of my own. I enjoyed comparing things. I enjoyed making up stories. I enjoyed saying what I really thought. I enjoyed describing, let us say, a battle, not in the history book way, but in a vivid, private way, from the point of view of a person engaged in the battle.

I wanted always to know what it felt like to be in a given situation, what it felt like to be a bowman at Crécy, or an engine driver, or a man going to his execution, or whatever it was. I wanted to feel that I had had that experience, that I had been in that place, that I had done that thing. I wanted to have as many experiences as possible, and I realized, when I was still at my first school, that if writers described things really well, then the reader could really share the experience, as if he had undergone it himself.

### VI

So, when I was at school, I always enjoyed any work that made a demand upon my imagination, that is, upon my

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power of seeing and feeling and hearing things I had not actually seen and felt and heard, and of building up, from what I did see and feel and hear, a great deal more about the subject, or the place, or the people, or whatever the start of the process might be.

And I tried, from the very start, to make my descriptions of things and people as precise as I could. If I felt anything, or had an experience, I tried to pass it on with the same accuracy which I asked of the writers whose books I read. I tried to share my experience.

I try still. I do not say that the idea of sharing is uppermost in my mind when I am actually putting the words down. I see something, and I try to put down on paper the words that suggest or describe the thing most clearly. If I can do that, or can come near doing it, then other people will be able to see it too.

## VII

I said "suggest the thing" because very often a suggestion does more than a detailed description. There is a member of my family who would make a wonderful writer if she took the trouble. Her talk is full of excellent suggestions which give one very clear pictures of the thing she is talking about.

Once she came back from a concert at the Queen's Hall, where there was a conductor who made very violent gesticulations to the orchestra with both his arms. She said, "He was like a spider trying not to be sucked down with the bath-water." Can you not see him, waving and scrambling and struggling? And she said that a person had eyes "like dirty little bottle-stoppers."

These are not *descriptions*: they are suggestions. They make us see one thing by comparing it with another.

## VIII

But, before the writer can start describing or suggesting things, he must know what it is he is trying to suggest or describe. He must understand what he is writing about. What he writes must be true.

I do not of course mean that it has to be literally true, true to fact. I do not mean that everything he writes must actually have happened, and that the people must be real people whose names are in the telephone directory. If I write a story about Mr. Smith who has a bull terrier and feeds it on chops, I do not mean that there has to be a real Mr. Smith who has a bull terrier and is so extravagant as to feed it on chops.

What I do mean is that everything I write about my Mr. Smith must fit in with having a bull terrier and feeding it on chops. I must not make him do or say anything which is not part of the picture I have put before the reader's mind. He must be the sort of man in whom you can *believe* when you read about him. You must be able to say to yourself, "Yes. Of course; that's just what he would have done."

I must describe a house of the kind that a man, living by himself with a bull terrier, might live in. I must make him talk to his bull terrier in the right tone of voice. And I must know something about bull terriers—more than I do at present.

And I must know something about chops. For instance, how much would he pay for his chops? I do not know. I have never bought a chop.

In the same way, if I write about Mrs. Jones, who has three daughters, and tells her friends that she and her daughters are all just pals together, and always makes a point of letting them bring their boy-friends to the house, saying that she and the girls have no secrets from each other, but really does it so that she can keep an eye on the

girls and be sure of what is going on—if I write about anybody like that, I must understand her perfectly, I must know what she looks like, how old she is, how good she is at tennis. I must know what sort of face powder she uses. I must have a nodding acquaintance with her friends, and I must know everything about the three daughters, what they feel, and just how each one is different from the other two.

It should now be clear what I mean when I say that what I write must be true. I mean that it must be *true to type*. The world which a writer creates in his story must stay faithful to its own rules. He must write honestly, and give you the truth about all the Mr. Smiths and the Mrs. Joneses and the Browns and the Robinsons as clearly as he can see it.

It does not matter if, as some writers do, he creates an entirely fancy world: an imaginary country with inhabitants of his own manufacture. His job is to make us believe in them. He has to make the impossible things sound probable—whereas many bad writers make possible things sound improbable. If he cannot make his imaginary world seem real, we, the readers, will feel uneasy, even if we do not exactly see where he has gone wrong.

## IX

All right, then. The writer has to know and understand what he is writing about. That is the first essential. But it will not help him unless he has some idea of how to write. Any one of you may be able to see a beautiful picture in your mind's eye: but in order to get it down on paper, you have to know how to draw or paint.

The same holds good of every art. No artist, no writer, however great, can solve his problems altogether. He goes on learning until he ceases to be capable of learning any more. And, as his skill increases, as his mastery over writing increases, the writer is able to write more truth-



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fully and more persuasively. For, as I said, it is not enough to see the truth—you have to be able to get it down on paper in such a way as to make people believe that it *is* the truth.

That is what we mean by saying that a character in a story, or a whole story, is convincing or unconvincing. We mean either that we can believe it, or that we cannot believe it. The writer either has satisfied us that the character is true, in the special sense we have just been talking about, or else he has failed to satisfy us. If he has failed, the reason will very often be, not that he has not seen and understood the truth to begin with, but that he has not known how to put it down convincingly, in such a way as to make us believe it.

## X

You will understand from all this that when I talk about books and writing, I do so from a live and practical point of view. I am thinking more of the writer's study and the reporter's note-book and the film director's desk than of the exercise-book and the classroom. I do not look upon writing as a matter of keeping to certain rules of grammar and avoiding certain mistakes in spelling and punctuation. I think of it as a way of putting true and interesting things down on paper so that other people can be interested in them and can believe them. I think of it as a way of sharing the good things which we see and know with other people.

But, before we can start on this business of sharing our experiences by writing, there are one or two elementary questions to be looked at.

## CHAPTER VI

### GOOD MANNERS ON PAPER: 1. PUNCTUATION

AT the end of the last chapter I said that I was going to approach English not so much from the classroom point of view as from the point of view of a practising writer. This does not mean that those two points of view need be different. Sometimes they are different, chiefly because the classroom lays greater emphasis on rules. A practising writer does not bother so much about rules. In the classroom, the tendency is to teach you to write correctly, that is to say, in the same way as other people write. The professional writer is not troubling his head about the way in which other people write. He finds quite enough to do in trying to write his own way.

All the same, however original his own way of writing may be, he *does* keep certain rules, if only by instinct. He keeps them because, if he did not, people would find difficulty in understanding what he was trying to say. There are certain conventions, certain good manners, about writing, just as there are certain conventions and certain good manners about the way we eat our meals at the table.

In the days when I was a teacher, trying to encourage the boys in my class to write, I always approached the rules of writing from this point of view of good manners. I was in something of a dilemma. I wanted the boys to write each one in his own way, and to say what he wanted to say in words of his own choosing. At the same time, if I let each one go exactly as he pleased, I would get some queer results: and the commonest of these results, especially with beginners, would be pages sprawled all over with

## PUNCTUATION

writing, with no paragraphs, and hardly any stops, except perhaps a comma here or there; pages which made my heart sink to look at them, because, quite apart from the fact that they looked solid and indigestible, I knew quite well how hard it was going to be to read them and make sense of them.

### II

This chapter, then, is about good manners in writing. I suggest that you should look at punctuation from that point of view—as a matter of ordinary good manners towards the person or the people who are going to have to read what you have written. It is only considerate, it is only polite, to make the business of reading your work, your letter, your story, your essay, your poem, whatever it is, as easy and as pleasant as you possibly can.

This is not the only way of looking at punctuation. There is the writer's point of view, as well as the reader's. The writer puts in the stops partly for his own benefit, to show how he wants his sentences to sound. But let us first of all consider it from the point of view of the person who is going to read what we have written.

### III

There are people who think that we make much too much fuss about punctuation, and that we use more stops than we need. But everyone is agreed that we must have *some* rules or habits in the way we arrange the words upon the page. Suppose we put them all straight down one after the other, without any paragraphs or any stops of any kind. Then we get something like this:—

He looked up in amazement, who did that I did, she said but what on earth for, never mind you must tell me, oh well if you really want to know of course, I do well it was

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because you were so unkind unkind what do you mean unkind you never told me that Harry had gone.

You may have managed to make sense of that as you went along, but you have found it unnecessarily difficult. So, in order to sort the meaning out for you, so that you will be able to read on with all your interest on his story, the writer arranges his words in a certain way. This way has become as natural and instinctive as good manners at the table, and, like good manners at the table, it has to be taught.

The writer rearranges the lump of words you have just read, using a separate line, a fresh paragraph, for each of the two speakers, and putting in such punctuation marks as enable us at once to see the meaning. The lump of words now becomes this:

He looked up in amazement. "Who did that?"

"I did," she said.

"But what on earth for?"

"Never mind."

"You must tell me."

"Oh well, if you really want to know——"

"Of course I do."

"Well, it was because you were so unkind."

"Unkind! What do you mean, unkind?"

"You never told me that Harry had gone."

## IV

In arranging that block of words, we use inverted commas, to mark off the words which the two people speak. We use separate paragraphs, to show where one person leaves off speaking and another begins. We use question-marks, to show when a question is being asked—and that is important for anyone who is going to read aloud, because, of course, one uses a different tone of voice for a question:

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and we use an exclamation mark for the same reason, to show the surprise which the man feels at being accused of being unkind.

“Unkind! What do you mean, unkind?”

And, in that sentence, we put a comma between *mean* and *unkind*, to show that there is a slight pause there. If we just wrote, “What do you mean unkind?” it would sound different, and the meaning would not be so clear.

## V

Question marks and exclamation marks, after all, need very little explanation. You can see how useful they are at once. The same applies to the dash—but I had better keep that for a minute, until we have talked about the comma. The comma is the one stop which everyone who is beginning to write seems to know. Unfortunately, beginners overwork it. You can see how necessary the comma is by writing out a sentence without using one at all. Here is such a sentence.

And it was he who for all these years in so many places and on every possible occasion had opposed every effort of this kind no matter by whom it was made with the greatest tenacity and obstinacy in season and out of season and to the very utmost of his power he who now suggested that we should agree to the Archbishop's proposal.

This is a very breathless affair, calling for a great deal of sorting out on the part of the reader. Now let us have it with stops.

And it was he who, for all these years, in so many places, and on every possible occasion, had opposed every effort of this kind, no matter by whom it was made, with the greatest tenacity and obstinacy, in season and out of

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season, and to the very utmost of his power—he who now suggested that we should agree to the Archbishop's proposal.

### VI

It is obvious, without any further explanation, what commas are for: to mark pauses, either for taking breath, or to make the sense clear, or both. If you read the sentence aloud, and listen carefully, you will notice that one pause is of a different kind from the rest. It is longer, and it is, so to speak, more abrupt: not so much a *pause* in the flow of the sentence, as a *break*. It comes near the end, before the repetition of *he who*.

That break is a dash: and we now see what a dash is for: to mark a break in the construction of the sentence, while the sense runs on.

That particular sentence had got itself tied up into a knot, because so much had happened since the first "he who" that we had lost sight of it. The sentence, as it were, had to take a deep breath and pull itself together by repeating "he who." That is the use of a dash: for breaks like that, and for slipping something quickly into the sentence, like this:

The girl who lived up the road—you know, the one I told you about last week—has gone away to work in the Land Army.

### VII

The full stop, I think, is clear enough. Its name tells what it is. It marks the end of one sentence, and, in order to pay it proper respect, we start the next sentence with a capital letter. Writers who are beginning do not use the full stop nearly often enough. Their sentences are much too long. It is not that they mean to write long sentences. They write a number of very short sentences, but only put

## PUNCTUATION

commas in between them, so that in effect we get one long, never-ending sentence, which drives the poor reader frantic as he tries to keep up with it.

At the beginning of each school year, half my class used to hand me up this sort of thing:

It was a fine day, Billy went for a walk, he felt so cheerful he whistled, there was a big tree, underneath it he saw two pigs, their names were Sid and Bert, Billy said how do you do, the pigs grunted back——

and so on and so forth, for one or two or three or four pages, according to the energy of the writer.

Now, quite apart from the fact that a comma is not strong enough to hold two independent sentences apart, reading that kind of stuff becomes frightfully tedious and monotonous, because there is only the same amount of pause between each of the little separate sentences, the separate things which we are told about Billy and his adventures. If our reading is to be interesting, it must have variety. A voice going on and on with precisely the same expression and precisely the same pauses will in the end bore us to distraction, or send us to sleep.

In order to hold our interest, therefore, the writer aims at as much variety as he can get. Commas are not enough. We need, as we have seen, the question marks and the exclamation marks to show the tone of voice: and we need something which will mark pauses of different lengths. The comma is the shortest pause, and the full stop is the longest. Between those we have two others, the semi-colon and the colon.

The semi-colon marks a longer pause than the comma, and the colon is twice as long as the semi-colon—strictly speaking. In actual practice, most writers nowadays use it more as if it were a dash. There is great freedom and difference among writers as to the use of the colon and semi-colon, and I cannot claim to have any consistent rule

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about it myself. Sometimes I use a colon to mark a longer pause than a semi-colon, but not so long as a full-stop: sometimes I use it to separate two sentences which are connected in sense. For instance, I used it in the middle of the sentence I have just written, to mark off and separate those two sentences which were both about the same thing, that is, the use of the colon.

### VIII

All these things, these questions of when to use one stop, and when to use another, are not so much rules as questions of good sense and good manners. As you saw from the sentences without any punctuation at all, the various stops were necessary in order to show what tone of voice to use, in order to show what the sense was, in order to see who was speaking to whom, and which belonged to what. These things are not just rules invented by schoolmasters so as to make writing difficult. They are habits and manners used by writers so as to make clear what they want to say, and to make reading easy.



## CHAPTER VII

### GOOD MANNERS ON PAPER: II. GRAMMAR

I SUGGESTED in the last chapter that punctuation was not so much a matter of rules as of good manners towards the reader, so that he or she might easily understand what was written. We saw that, if all the words were put down higgledy-piggledy, without stops and without paragraphs, the meaning was difficult to sort out, and the reader could not tell in what tone of voice the conversations were being spoken.

As a writer, I look at grammar in the same way. There are certain things which we have to learn in order to make our daily life go smoothly. We teach small children how to eat at table, we have certain ways of behaving when we meet people for the first time, we stand up when a lady comes into the room, and so on and so forth. These things are part of our ordinary behaviour.

In the same way, when we are writing, we observe and keep certain conventions, which, like the rules of the road, make things easier for our readers. When I was a teacher, I always refused to teach grammar as a separate thing, because I felt that that was the wrong way to look at it. Grammar is not a dead body of rules, a sort of iron frame into which the English language is pushed whether it likes it or not. It is a living thing, part of the language. The really important thing to remember about grammar is that it does not govern what we say and write, but that what we say and write makes grammar and becomes grammar.

The first people who spoke a language did not worry about grammar. All they were concerned with was to make their meaning clear to one another.

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It was not till a long time after the language had been in use that the idea of grammar began. There was no schoolmaster in those early days, to draw up a code of rules, and say to people, "Look here, this is the way you've got to speak, and write."

It was not until someone started to study the language as it was spoken and written that the idea of grammar began. The people who had been using the language had, for the sake of clearness, fallen into certain habits of speaking and writing. At last somebody took it into his head to make a list of these habits. That list was the first book of grammar. And after that, once people had realized that there *were* regular habits of speaking and writing, it helped them for the future.

It is because language grows so fast, and takes in so many words and ideas from other languages, that the grammar of every language, in Europe at any rate, has so many exceptions to all its rules. A foreigner who learned the verb "take"—take, took, taken—might expect the verbs "wake" and "bake" to go the same way—bake, book, baken: but they don't. And so on.

If there were not these exceptions, learning a language would be a comparatively easy business. But, unfortunately for us, languages do not grow up obedient to the rules of their own grammar. They grow in all directions, very fast, and grammar follows, making its notes and its lists, and trying hard to keep up.

## II

In English we have, by now, a very considerable grammar: a very big list of habits and rules, to each one of which there are many exceptions. Just now, I compared these rules to good manners—using the term "good manners" in its widest sense, to cover all our ideas and habits of behaviour when we live together in a community. If, for instance, you say or write sentences like "Between

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you and I, it's him what done it": if you say, as the country people used to say in the part of the world where I come from, "You never didn't ought to have went," and "Us'll go along of she, if her'll come along of we": then the effect is very much the same as if you were to go out to tea in a paper hat, a bathing dress, and a pair of Wellington boots.

You would look absurd dressed up like that, because, however useful any of the three things you were wearing might be in their proper place, they do not go well together, and a tea party is not the place for any of them. The customs of this country do not recommend such a costume for such an occasion.

## III

But there is more to grammar than the idea of looking ridiculous or not looking ridiculous. In comparing grammar to good manners, I was not only thinking of good manners as a set of rules on the surface, which we keep so as not to look ridiculous. I was thinking of real good manners, the good manners that are not only things we learn to do and not to do, but are part of our character.

Real good manners mean consideration for other people. Real good manners express our wish to treat other people as we would like them to treat us: to give room for their convenience and their wishes: to put them at their ease, to make and keep them happy: to see that they have everything they want, as far as it is in our power to give it to them. In fact, good manners are not something on the surface of our life at all. They are a part of the structure of our life, that grows with us.

In the same way, grammar is not something on the surface of a language, a series of polite tricks which we learn so as to be in the swim and not to look ridiculous. It is part of the living language, part of its structure. If we compare the English language to a house, then grammar is

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not just the paint on the outside and the little mouldings and decorations round the windows, or anything like that. It is built right into the structure of the house. It is what keeps the walls in place and holds up the floors. Without its grammar, English would collapse into a frightful jumble of words, just as, if you pull away the foundations of a house, it collapses into a shapeless mass of bricks and broken woodwork and plaster. It would collapse, because the grammar is a live thing which has grown with the language, and which has helped the language to grow, and has held it together.

### IV

Let us take another illustration. Suppose that you are starting to learn to draw, and your teacher allows you to have a go at a living model. The model sits or stands in a place where you can easily see, and you have to draw that person in whatever position he or she is. You may be sufficiently clever to copy that figure pretty closely, but the odds are that you will take a long time, because you do not know the grammar of that figure.

By the grammar of that figure, I mean the anatomy, the arrangement of bones and muscles, but particularly of bones. If you have a good eye and a real talent for drawing, you may make a very good shot at drawing the figure properly. But, if you set a professional artist down to draw the figure, he will do it far more quickly and—probably—far better than you, because, quite apart from the skill which years of practice have given him in using his pencil, he will know the figure's grammar. He will know all about its bones and muscles, and he will know, too, the rules of perspective, which make it look to him as it does.

You probably know what perspective is. In case you do not, take a look at the railway lines next time you are on a station platform or on a bridge. You will see that,

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although you know quite well they are the same distance apart all the way along, they seem to get closer and run together as they go away from you. The rule of sight that makes them seem to run together holds good for everything which we see: and if you try to draw a figure sitting in a chair, or standing on the floor, you cannot be sure of getting it to look right unless you have a good knowledge of these rules—which are, so to speak, the grammar of drawing the figure in relation to the things around it.

## V

It will now be clear why I keep insisting that grammar is not just a dull, dead series of rules into which our living language has been forced against its will. The old grammar books, which were put in front of me when I was at school, were enough to put anyone off, because they tried to tackle this question of grammar as if it were something on its own. As if, instead of being the language itself, our own English language, it was merely a set of rules about the language. We cannot separate language and grammar any more than we can separate flesh and bone in the living body.

At least, if we do separate the grammar from the language, all we will get is a dead, dry skeleton, or some shrivelled muscle, not the living thing at all.

I take it that we do not want to study corpses and skeletons. We want to study English, the living speech in which we express all we think and do and are. Every time we write a story or an essay, a letter or even a sentence, we are making something in exactly the same way as if we sat down to draw a picture or play a tune. To play a tune, we must keep certain rules, or the tune will not be a tune at all. It will merely be a series of notes coming one after the other without sense or purpose.

It we are drawing something, and our drawing is all cock-eyed, a horse with one leg twice as long as the others,

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a man with a left hand on the end of his right arm and a knee-joint in the middle of his shin—that is, unless, for some perfectly special reason of our own, we are drawing him like that on purpose, and know quite well what we are doing and why we are doing it—if we draw like that through ignorance of the grammar of what we are drawing, then our picture will not represent what it is trying to represent.

### VI

And, if we write our essay, our story, our letter, our sentence without any regard for the grammar of the language, the result will be just as queer. What is much worse, it will not represent to other people what we are trying to say. Wrong grammar is wrong, not only because it does not pay attention to the way other people behave when they speak and write, but because it gets in our own way. By making it harder for the reader to understand what we want him to understand, it does us a bad turn. We cannot say what we want to say.

### VII

That is why writers pay attention to the laws of grammar, and, if sometimes they vary them a little, do so quite deliberately, for purposes of their own. They *know* the laws, and for the most part they keep them almost by instinct. They do so because it is their business to make their meaning clear to other people, and because they are the users of a living language.

## CHAPTER VIII

### TOO MANY WORDS

ONE of the secrets of good writing—I am not sure it is not the most important of all—is never to use two words where one will do. Economy in writing has always been the sign of a good writer. The bad writer says what he wants to say loosely and carelessly, splashing down one word after another, and missing his aim because he is not exact: because he has never really taken the trouble to think out clearly what he wants to say. You can always tell when the writer of an essay or a newspaper article is being lazy and is not sure of his ground. He begins loosely, using a lot of unnecessary words, and saying the same thing over and over again in different ways. He has not taken the trouble to think before he writes, to get down to the heart of his subject and state it clearly and simply.

## II

It is safe to say that almost every piece of writing, every story, every essay is the better for being shortened. The only writing of which this is not true is the work of great writers who have pared everything down so closely and carefully that you cannot take out a sentence, or even a word, without losing some of the meaning. But, for nine out of ten of us, cutting improves what we have written.

I have often, when editors would not take a short story of five thousand words, cut it down to three thousand, and sold it without difficulty. That, I agree, proves nothing. What matters is that in its shorter form it was a better story.

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Now, I try not to be lazy, and not to write anything unnecessarily. But, because, as a general rule, papers and magazines pay more the longer a story or an article is, some writers, instead of trying to write as shortly as possible, do all they can to spin their stuff out and make it longer. The result is that very often you could write the substance of a whole long article on a post card: and many such articles are like the speeches of certain politicians, that is to say, long-winded and elaborate ways of saying nothing at all.

### III

I dare say you have seen the little magazines, of which there are a good many nowadays, called Digests. These magazines, as their title implies, digest stories and articles from other magazines and newspapers, and give them in a shortened form. They digest them, and get the good out of them, and throw away what they do not want.

Like many another writer, I have sometimes resented having my work shortened in this fashion. But, when I have come to read it, I have not realized what bits have been left out: and—I hate having to admit it—I am afraid the people who did the digesting improved my work! Yet I try all the time to do my own digesting, and not leave in anything unnecessary.

### IV

This shortening can be of two kinds. One can leave out an incident in a story, or a few lines of conversation. One can leave out a point, or a paragraph, in an article. That is shortening the *substance* of a thing, and editors and writers often have to do it.

The other kind of shortening no editor should have to do, because the writer should do it for himself: and that is cutting out unnecessary words. However much of an



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article or story may have to be left out because it is not essential, the author ought not to have left in any unnecessary words. He ought not to have used two adjectives when his meaning could be more exactly given by one. He ought not to have said the same thing twice in a single sentence.

I dare say you think it unlikely that he would say the same thing twice in a single sentence. Needless to say, he does not do it on purpose. He may do it, if he is talking or teaching. In fact, he very often does, as I very often do in these pages, so as to try to make sure that everyone will follow what I am saying. But that is a special case.

## V

Here is an example of someone unknowingly saying the same thing twice in one sentence.

“There was a crown of trees on the top of the hill.”

It is obviously unnecessary to say that there was a crown of trees, *and* that the trees were on top of the hill. If the trees were not on top of the hill, they would not be a crown. You can put it either way you like, but you gain nothing whatever by putting it twice. At the same time, if anyone is writing without thinking what he is doing, it is quite easy to put down this sort of thing, and repeat oneself in the same sentence without realizing it.

## VI

Next let us look at a different kind of sentence, which does not repeat itself, but which is a great deal longer than it need be.

“Mr. Smith replied that, while the circumstances were undoubtedly difficult, and both inauspicious and unpromising for the inauguration of any fresh project, he would leave nothing undone, but would explore every avenue that might lead to an opportunity for setting in

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motion the project concerning which they had solicited his help."

This is, perhaps, an exaggerated example, but replies not unlike it are sometimes given by Parliamentary officials to deputations of people who come and ask them to do something which they do not want to do. In plain English, that long sentence boils down to, "He said that times were bad, but he would do what he could."

## VII

One can say a lot more than one needs, even in simple words. It is not necessary to use long words and phrases in order to write too much. You merely have to blur your meaning and make it misty and confused by giving little bits of your point in each of three or four sentences, instead of putting it down plainly in one.

"He started back as if he had been shot. His eyes opened wide, and after them his mouth.

"'What!' he exclaimed in amazement. 'Is it you?'"

The repetition here is plain to see. We have been told he was surprised in three separate sentences. And, although sometimes a point is strengthened by being repeated, few readers are so dense that they need it hammered into their heads like this.

If we said, "He started back open-mouthed. 'What!' he exclaimed. 'Is it you?'," we should have conveyed his surprise quite enough—unless he were the village idiot, in which case any exceptional slowness of reaction could be suitably described.

## VIII

Let us try some more sentences which have got something unnecessary in them, or which, because they are carelessly written, mean something different from what the writer intended. Here is a very old favourite:

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“He repeated it again.”

This sentence *may* be correct, but only if the writer means that the person he is talking about said the thing at least three times. “Repeat” means “say again,” but this elementary mistake occurs very often in work by people who ought to know better, when all they mean is, “He *said* it again.”

If you were thinking of it logically, in terms of the number of times the man said it, the order would be this.

Number one: “He said it.”

Number two: “He repeated it”—or, if you prefer, “He said it again.”

Number three: “He said it a third time,” or, “He repeated it again.”

This trick of using a word with a special meaning, and then forgetting its special meaning, and putting in a second word to give that special meaning, is one of the commonest ways of saying the same thing twice.

## IX

Here is another simple sentence taken from a novel I was reading.

“He went out through the exit.”

Where else would one expect him to go out? If he went out through the Way In, there would be some point in saying so: but, in the ordinary course of things, people always go out through the exit, so that there is no point in saying so.

## X

In English, we have a great number of words derived from different languages which mean very much the same thing. These are a great catch, especially to anyone who writes easily and quickly. They tumble readily from his mind, and are apt to go down on paper without thought.

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I wonder how many times I have read in the same paragraph that a person was little and diminutive. Only the other day, I read this, in a magazine story.

"He minimized everything she had been through, making little of her sufferings, and laughing away the hardships of her journey."

Here you have the same idea three times over. It is true that "minimized" and "laugh away" are not necessarily the same, but the central idea of "making little" appears three times. "Minimize" is a word of Latin derivation, meaning "to make as little as possible"; so that we do not want both it and "making little" to describe the same process.

If you want to find which word, or which phrase, to use on an occasion like this, the answer is to choose the strongest. Look at the sentence again.

"He minimized everything she had been through, making little of her sufferings, and laughing away the hardships of her journey."

We are to ask ourselves which of those three, "minimized," "making little," and "laughing away" has the most character in it? Which gives the best idea of the man and what he was doing?

I should plump for "laughing away." It has the advantage over the other two that it not only tells you what he did, but how he did it. He laughed all her troubles away. He would not take them seriously. As a writer, I should go every time for "laughing away," and make it the main verb in the sentence. I should write:

"He laughed away all she had been through"—because "all she had been through" includes her sufferings and her hardships.

So now we have a short, precise sentence instead of a long and vague one. It is worth remembering, too, that in the story I did not need any of that stuff about hardships and sufferings, because I had just been reading the account of these. In the story, the sentence did not stand by itself,

## TOO MANY WORDS

so that it was actually a worse bit of writing than it seems when take out of its context and made to stand alone.

## XII

I do not mean by all this that one should write as if one were sending a telegram, and every word cost a penny. That would be bad writing, in any case, because the reader would at once see that things were being left out. Part of the secret of good writing is that it should never suggest to the reader how it is done, or make him think of anything but the story or the sense of what he is reading. I mean only that we should practise in writing the same sort of economy we practise in other ways, guarding against waste, and not taking a pickaxe to crack a nut. The worst of taking a pickaxe to crack a nut is that it does not crack the nut very well. It smashes the shell and the kernel to smithereens, and there is nothing left.

In the same way, if you use too many words, or your words are too long and too heavy, you will smash up the meaning of what you are trying to say, and there will be nothing left, or very little, and it will have no flavour.

## CHAPTER IX

### WRITING TO THE POINT

WHEN I was a small boy, I often remember my Grandmother coming home from a shopping expedition, and proceeding to give an account of what she had seen and done. We will suppose that the main purpose of her journey had been to call on the carpenter, whose name was Rathbone, and find out when he could come to mend the leg of my Grandfather's favourite arm-chair.

My grandfather would turn round as she came into the room, and look at her.

"Well, Amelia. And did you see Rathbone?"

"I did, Alfred. I did. I started out in the tram, and, do you know, I had to wait ten minutes, if I had to wait one. What had happened I don't know. And while I was waiting, who should come up to me only Kate Moffat. She has her daughter staying with her, the one who was married last year to the young organist from the church. You remember him, Alfred? You didn't like the way he wore his hair."

"Tch, tch, tch, Amelia. I'm not asking you about the organist. I want to know——"

"Poor girl, she's been having such trouble, Kate was telling me. No sooner was she in the new house than the water-tank went wrong, and she with her baby only six weeks old, a delicate little thing, too."

"Ah, woman, will you talk sense! What did Rathbone say?"

"Yes, well, I was going to tell you. I got the tram at last, and in it, up at the far end, was old Mr. Montague. I couldn't get near him at first, but when a woman got out

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with three little girls—nice-looking little girls they were—one of them had on a frock made of that yellow silky stuff, Marion—what's the name of it? You know: the kind you got for little Ethel last summer."

Then my mother would come into the conversation. My grandfather would be gibbering with fury, and would shout at his good lady, but it would not do him a bit of good.

"Ah, Alfred, how can I tell you, if you keep fussing at me! Sure I'm telling you as fast as I can."

## II

We all know that sort of story-teller: the story-teller who in speaking or writing keeps straying from the point to something else; whose attention leaps from thing to thing, like a baby's or a kitten's. (It would not perhaps be quite fair to say my grandmother could not keep to the point. She could not keep to my grandfather's point. She was interested in everything and everybody.) But there is a kind of talk, a kind of writing, which straggles all over the place, as hers did, bless her: and it can be a great nuisance.

There are, in the English language, one or two great books which straggle and get their charm, if not their greatness, from straggling. But the writers knew what they were doing. They straggled from choice, not because they did not know any better. And they showed very clearly, in important places, that when necessary they could write very much to the point.

## III

By writing to the point I mean using words to say what one needs to say as shortly and economically and vividly as possible.

Suppose that the enemy have landed, and are thought to be occupying a certain place, and you are sent to

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reconnoitre and report. The place is a well-known beauty spot. The day is fine, and the trees look marvellous in their autumn colouring. You come back, and the officer asks you what you have seen.

You do not begin your report with a lyrical description of the scenery. You say, as quickly as possible, whether the enemy were there.

If, on the other hand, the circumstances were different, and you were sent by a paper to write an article about autumn in the countryside, then you *would* describe the scenery. The scenery would be the point, just as it was not the point on the first occasion.

Writing to the point means concentrating on what is important and getting it down as quickly and as clearly as you can.

### IV

There is no limit to the number of ways in which this can be done. You can write to the point very shortly, as in an urgent message: bluntly, as when you blurt out a fact without preparation or trimmings: imaginatively, as when instead of saying outright what you want to say, you suggest it, and leave it to your listener to fill in the picture.

A few examples. I was talking just now of books that wandered and gossiped, like my grandmother. One of the greatest of these is *Tristram Shandy*, written two hundred years ago by an eccentric clergyman called Laurence Sterne. Yet Sterne could write marvellously to the point. Here is how he describes the death of a man called le Fevre:

“The blood and spirits of le Fevre, which were waxing cold and slow within him, and were retreating to their last citadel, the heart, rallied back—the film forsook his eyes for a moment—he looked up wistfully in my Uncle Toby’s face—then cast a look upon his boy. . . .



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"Nature instantly ebbed again—the film returned to its place—the pulse fluttered—stopped—went on—throbbed—stopped again—moved—stopped—shall I go on?—No."

### V

That is the imaginative way of doing it: absolutely economical, not a word too many: a mixture of description with suggestion. One could not imitate Laurence Sterne—but one can get hints from him on writing to the point: even though in all English literature it would be hard to think of anyone who made such a practice of writing off it.

### VI

Anyone who cares for good writing and good speaking has been getting an extra delight from Mr. Churchill's speeches since the war began. We shall be quoting him in another chapter, when we are examining the making of phrases. But, as good phrases are always to the point, we may as well consider him now. Let us take just two examples, from one of his many speeches in the House of Commons on the progress of the war. One concerned the Royal Air Force—a sentence in which he compressed all they had been doing, all that it meant to England and to the whole world, all our admiration of it, and all our gratitude towards them.

It was a tall order, to get so much into one short sentence, every word of which was clear and so simple that a small child could understand it. How could he do it? How could he get it into seventeen words, such simple words that only three have more than one syllable? It sounds impossible.

Here is what Mr. Churchill said:

"Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

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Only a writer can fully understand what a marvel that sentence is.

### VII

Another is as good—and even shorter. Mr. Churchill wanted to say how necessary to the whole life of the country, to the war effort, was the work in the factories, the munitions, the supplies, everything we needed, and how they were among the places the enemy was most anxious to attack.

Here again there seems an impossible lot to cram into one short, vivid sentence. This time Mr. Churchill took, not seventeen words, but seven. He said, "The front line runs through the factories."

Turn that over in your mind. Think it out. It is the imaginative way of putting things—the greatest economy of words, the greatest power of suggestion. This is our language at its strongest, the work of a master of words.

### VIII

I suppose that the greatest master of economy in words was not an English writer at all, but the Roman historian Tacitus. Tacitus wrote in Latin, which gave him an unfair advantage. Latin is a language in which it is easy to be brief, to cram much into little.

All the same, Tacitus took the prize. He was brilliant at making sarcastic remarks consisting of two or three words, which need at least twice as many English words to translate them.

Once Tacitus was talking of a Roman emperor who had a law passed to the effect that he should be able to take for his own use a certain amount of the public money. Tacitus adds a remark of two words, which one can only translate "as if that made any difference."

He meant that the Emperor took the public money

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anyway, law or no law. And he put it all into two words, whereas in English we need six.

### IX

All the same, it is not the actual number of words used that matters. What matters is that the whole meaning should be absolutely clear. It is not necessary—let me say it again—to write as if you were sending a telegram. Use all the words you need: but do not use any more.

Talking of telegrams reminds me of a beautiful example of economy—a telegram of three words.

A schoolmaster whom I knew was very clever, but terribly untidy. He dressed anyhow, in the shabbiest of old clothes. One day he told his friends that he had worked out a system for playing roulette, which is a gambling game played by spinning a wheel. There are numbers round the rim of the wheel, and you choose the number at which you think it will stop, and bet your money on it.

The schoolmaster said he had worked out a system by which he was bound to win. He was a very good mathematician, and he explained his system to his friends. Much impressed, they collected a large sum of money. The idea was that he should go to Monte Carlo, and win a fortune with their money and his system.

Unfortunately, at Monte Carlo things were done in style. To go into the Casino, one had to wear evening dress—a thing the old schoolmaster had not done for years. So the people at home, anxiously waiting to hear that the system had won them a fortune, got instead a telegram three words long: "Brutes won't admit."

No three words could have been more to the point.

### X

To be able to write to the point is of the greatest value. Working on a newspaper, especially in war-time, when

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paper is restricted and every quarter-inch of space is precious: writing for the theatre, where not a line must be wasted: writing scripts for films, where space and time are more valuable still: everywhere the need for economy is so great that the man who cannot write to the point is lost. I am not thinking for the moment of the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy, where reports which were not strictly to the point would mean delay and perhaps loss of life: the need there for writing to the point must be obvious to everybody. But for all of us, writers or not, in school or out of it, the rule is the same.

Be sure what you want to say.

Say it as simply and shortly as you can.

Stick to business.

Keep to the point. Everything else will take care of itself.

That applies as much to the finest writing as it does to an advertisement or an A.R.P. notice. In the finest writing, the point is more subtle, it is suggested more than described: but the rule remains. The business of writing is to convey a meaning as clearly and as fully as possible.

## CHAPTER X

### THE "MOT JUSTE" AND THE TELLING PHRASE

THE "mot juste" is a French expression which we use because we have no exact equivalent in English. It means the right word in the right place. It need not be one word only: it can be a phrase. We use it to express complete aptness, a word or phrase that hits the nail exactly on the head and leaves nothing more to be said.

The "mot juste" may be witty—it often is. It may describe a person, or a thing, or a situation: and, as I said, it may consist of one word or of several. But it must be exact—the precise and neat expression of a precise thought.

## II

For examples of the "mot juste" we need go no further than to Mr. Winston Churchill. Mr. Churchill has all his life been a master of the phrase. He has never lacked vigorous and pungent words in which to express his vigorous and pungent thoughts, and of recent years he has surpassed himself. Whether we always agreed with him or not, there was no doubt about the classic vigour of his utterance.

Nor could anyone doubt what he meant. There is nothing vague about Mr. Churchill's speeches. If he answers a question in the House of Commons, his answer is clear. He scorns the ambiguous, might-mean-one-thing, might-mean-another sort of answer which some Ministers apparently think desirable. No one in England can put a matter more uncompromisingly.

Take, for instance, what he said about the Munich settle-

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ment. People feel differently about this, so let it be supposed that I quote Mr. Churchill less for the sake of what he said than for the vigour and precision with which he said it. "We were offered," said Mr. Churchill, "the choice between war and dishonour. We have chosen dishonour, and we shall get war."

There was no doubt what that meant. Smack, smack, smack—the utterance of a clear and vigorous and down-right mind with an exceptional command of words.

Or take the unforgettable phrase—the unforgettable "not just"—with which, early in the war, he announced the activities of the Navy against German U-boats. The Navy, he said, was hunting down its prey, "with zeal, and not without relish." Not without relish! Can't you hear the smack of the lips? And how much better, in that particular context, is "not without relish" than just "with relish."

### III

These are the phrases of the born phrase-maker. But to be a phrase-maker is not enough. Literary history is full of phrase-makers, most of them forgotten. There must be a sincerity, a truth behind the phrase, if it is to pass into the language and be immortal.

A dozen of Mr. Churchill's phrases, we may dare to prophesy, will be immortal. As long as English history lasts, people will remember the things he said—not only because they are great phrases, not only because they are true, but because they are great phrases *and* because they are true.

"When we are doing the finest thing in the world and have the honour to be the sole champion of the liberties of all Europe, we must not grudge these years nor weary as we toil and struggle through them."

Brave words, as Shakespeare would have called them: brave in the double sense: the right words in the right place.

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### IV

Now let us go back a couple of hundred years, to a great phrase-maker, a great speaker of "mots justes," with whom Mr. Churchill has something in common.

If Mr. Churchill were to sit down to dinner with the great Dr. Samuel Johnson, the two men would get on famously. Dr. Johnson is chiefly famous for the dictionary which took years of his life to write. He was a great wit and man of letters, and had the respect of almost everyone of his time. He was big, eccentric, loud of voice, very kind to all sorts of people, had a short temper and very bad table manners, a relic of the time when he was young and poor and had not enough to eat: so that, when he had enough, he over-ate.

Dr. Johnson would rejoice in the blunt English vigour of Mr. Churchill, and Mr. Churchill would delight, as he must often have delighted, in the rolling utterance of one of the great English masters of the phrase, a man whose opinions were even more downright than his own, and perhaps even more vigorously expressed.

Both men write rhetorically, that is to say, they are natural speakers, and delight in the sound and sonority of words and phrases. Dr. Johnson was longer in the wind. He wrote a Latin style, more pronounced than Mr. Churchill's, and he loved long words. He would have nodded approvingly when Mr. Churchill, many years ago now, found a new name for a lie. In Parliament one must not say that a Member has told a lie. Mr. Churchill got round it by speaking of a "terminological inexactitude." It is just such a phrase as Dr. Johnson might have used—except that, if he meant a lie, it would have been hard, even in Parliament, to get him to say anything less.

## V

An example of the Doctor's fullness of phrase comes in his essay on the poet Milton. Milton at one period of his life kept a school in London, and there were wonderful stories of the extraordinary things he taught his pupils. Dr. Johnson had his doubts. He observed that you could not teach a person faster than he could learn. "The speed of the rider is governed by the power of the horse." And he went on to say that anyone who had undertaken to teach another knew how little progress he could make, and how hard it was "to stimulate sluggish indifference, to recall vagrant inattention, and to rectify absurd misapprehension."

How do those at school to-day like that? Do they recognize themselves? I wonder. And, by the way, has not the learned Doctor tripped up? When he speaks of recalling inattention, does he not mean recalling attention? It is attention that wanders, not inattention. And no teacher would want to recall inattention. It would be no good to him if he got it.

## VI

But the great Doctor did not always use long words. He could be very brief. A certain lady in Lincolnshire took him into her garden, and insisted on dragging him off to see a new grotto she had made. Dr. Johnson did not care for grottoes. He did not wish to see it. If people made him do a thing he did not wish to do, they paid for it.

"There," said the lady, showing the grotto, "don't you think, Mr. Johnson, it will make a cool habitation in the summer?"

"Yes, Madam"—said Dr. Johnson—"I suppose it will—for a toad."

Dr. Johnson had a friend called Boswell, to whom we



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owe most of our knowledge of him, for Boswell kept a very full diary. Boswell was fond of asking the Doctor silly questions, and often got his head snapped off in consequence. One of the silliest luckily found the Doctor in a good humour.

"Sir," Boswell asked, "what would you do if you found yourself alone in a tower at midnight with a new-born baby?"

"Sir," replied Johnson, "I should much dislike my company."

## VII

Our next example is nearly two thousand years old. There was a certain very cruel Roman emperor, one of whose hobbies—his most harmless—was to pull flies to pieces. One day a man came with a request. He halted nervously in the ante-room, and asked a courtier if there was anyone with the emperor. The courtier smiled. "Not even a fly," he said.

## VIII

For examples of the single "mot juste" we can turn to poetry. The use of the "lonely word," as it has been called—the simple word placed in a position of emphasis and importance—is one of the marks of great poetry, and of a poet who knows his business. There is a celebrated one in Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. Brutus and Cassius are discussing the strange signs and portents which have been seen in the streets of Rome. Cassius says,

Against the Capitol I met a lion  
Who glar'd upon me and went surly by.

"Surly"—what an object lesson in the use of the simple word, in its perfect place in the line: the place where its

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effect is doubled, trebled. This art of placing a word is a property of good poets in every age.

Another thing they can do is to use a word which has become stale and overworked in such a way as to make it seem new, as if nobody had ever used it before. W. B. Yeats did this with one of the most overworked and hackneyed words in the language. He was describing a fleet of swans on the dark waters of a lake: and he said,

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time on this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trod with a lighter tread.

You noticed the word, of course: it was in the first line.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures. . . .

Brilliant—a word used loosely and carelessly in so many senses that it has lost its meaning: but Yeats took it and made it new. What a perfect word to describe the bright, large, vivid birds on the dark water. You see, no word that I can find makes you see them half as well. That is the “mot juste”—the exact word in the exact place.

## IX

To read good writing gives us an appreciation of this sort of thing, a joy in the use of words, a taste and a discrimination that tells us when they are used well and when they are used badly: and presently we find that loose and sloppy and careless writing, writing that does not trouble how words are used, that flings them about anyhow, that is careless how many words it uses, that if it cannot hit the bull's-eye with one tries half a dozen, each one missing worse than the last, and the whole lot adding up to a mere proof of incompetence on the part of the

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writer—we find that that sort of work does not satisfy us any more. It offends us, as bad workmanship in our own particular line offends us. It has no meaning. It is wasteful. It is pointless.

Once you have heard good speaking and good writing, once you have appreciated the use of the right word in the right place, you have no patience with what is weak and slipshod. The right word in the right place—the right sort of word, the right coloured word, the right sized word.

To use a long affected word where a short simple one will do is not good writing. To use a whacking big word for a small thing is not good writing. Dickens got a number of his most absurd effects by doing this on purpose, with his tongue in his cheek, and a number of comic writers have followed him.

The object of writing is to say what you need to say in the best way possible: and that is nine times out of ten the simplest way. Get your meaning clear in your own mind first, and then take care you make it clear to others. But get it clear to yourself first—or you will never make it clear to anyone.

## CHAPTER XI

### WORDS IN THEIR ORDER

WHEN the poet Coleridge was asked for a definition of poetry, he replied, "the best words in the best order." It was not a good definition of poetry—with all respect to a very great critic—because it could apply just as well to prose. The trouble about words like "best" is that they mean nothing unless one defines them clearly. Best for what? It makes a lot of difference.

For instance, if we were drawing up an advertisement for somebody's soap, or for a patent food, then the best words would be those that described it best, said how good it was and why, and the best order would be the order that made most sense, sounded most attractive, and persuaded Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Robinson to buy it when they went out shopping.

So, unless we are very careful to say what sort of best we mean—best for what purpose—Coleridge's definition would apply just as easily to our advertisement, or to instructions what to do in an air-raid.

## II

But Coleridge's definition has one great value, which is the reason I have mentioned it. It reminds us of the great importance of order in words. It reminds us how greatly the order matters: how, in fact, the whole quality of a thing written depends on the order in which the words are put.

By a simple change in the order of the words, you can turn fine poetry into nonsense. You can make noble and

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dignified sentences sound silly. You can upset the whole meaning of a phrase. You can play ducks and drakes with sense, beauty, meaning, value, sound.

### III

Sometimes, in the case of very beautiful and very simple words, you cannot change the order. The order in which they are written is the natural order, and, try as you will, you cannot change it. Even though they were written centuries ago, when the order of words differed from what we are accustomed to to-day, still we can hardly make a change.

Listen to this old carol, written between five and six hundred years ago. I am bringing one word in it up-to-date: and there is another, at the end of the fourth line, which is no longer in use. The word is "ches"—and it means "chose."

Here is the carol:

I sing of a maiden  
That is matcheless.  
King of all kings  
To her son she ches.

He came all so still  
Where his mother was,  
As dew in April  
That falleth on the grass.

He came all so still  
To his mother's bower,  
As dew in April  
That falleth on the flower.

He came all so still  
Where his mother lay,  
As dew in April  
That falleth on the spray.

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Mother and maiden  
Was never none but she:  
Well may such a lady  
Goddess mother be.

### IV

In the first stanza, instead of "King of all kings To her son she ches," you *could* say "She chose the King of all Kings for her son": though, of course, if you did, you would break the rhythm and lose the rhyme.

The next three stanzas you could not well alter. The last you could: you could say, "None but she was ever a mother and a maiden at the same time: well may such a lady be God's mother"—but again, you would have lost rhyme and rhythm, and you would not have gained anything to make up for them, because the meaning is perfectly clear as it stands.

Nothing *need* be done: nothing *can* be done without spoiling even the meaning. Because the meaning of a poem is not something which you can put in other words, or separate from the poem, like taking a bone out of a fish. It *is* the poem, as it stands. The music, the rhythm, the rhyme, are all parts of the meaning, just as much as the sense of what the poem is about. When the words are in the best order—by which I mean the best order for those words to convey that particular meaning—then you cannot change them without loss to the meaning.

### V

I want to make this point very clear, because there are still people who think that poetry is a sort of fancy dress for a plain meaning which can be put just as well in prose. It is not—any more than you, the person, the character, the real you, could be put just as well in another body. Your shape and features and appearance are a part of your

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meaning, just as a poem's shape and appearance and features—its lines, its rhymes if it has any, its music—are a part of its meaning.

The meaning is born with and in the poem, just as you were born in and with your body. We can give an account of the poem, in other words, just as we can give an account of you: but it will not *be* you, any more than the other account will be the poem.

## VI

But, as I said, it is not only poetry that depends on order: the right words in the right order: the best words in the best order.

Many years ago, when I was a boy staying in Cornwall during the Christmas holidays, I saw a notice scrawled up in straggly letters on an envelope, and nailed to the gate of a turnip field. The notice was very simple. It said: "The man what belongs stealing turnips out of this field better watch out for the police."

Now that notice was not in the best English. If we wanted to find fault with it, we should say, "The man who": also, most of us do not say "belongs" when we mean "is accustomed to" or "makes a habit of." They do in Cornwall and Devon, but not in London or the North. "Belongs" is a local expression. We should probably say "had better watch out," too. But what a good notice it was. How clear: how well to the point. The thief would understand "belongs"—so, for him, the word was the right word. He would understand the rest too.

Although the farmer's grammar was not perfect, I maintain that his notice was a good example of the right words in the right order. It gave its meaning in the shortest possible space. It was, in the writer's sense, good English: good, simple, straightforward English, with a touch of local colour, and no nonsense about it.

### VII

For, after all, the purpose of all writing is to express a meaning. That applies not only to the farmer's notice but to the most exquisite of poems. The meaning may vary tremendously in quality: it may be simple—don't steal turnips—or it may be something so subtle and deep that only the ablest and most sympathetic minds can understand it, a meaning which can only be suggested in the music of fine poetry. But the best words and the best order, in each case, will be those which give the meaning as clearly and economically as possible.

### VIII

For a last example, let us take something which is admittedly complicated and difficult: a famous piece of writing in praise of the ancient Greek language. This paragraph was written in the last century, under the influence of a style of writing which was deliberate, mannered, and decorated: rather too grand, perhaps, for our taste to-day: but which, at its best, said many very fine things.

The writer was F. W. H. Myers, a well-known critic and scholar in Greek and Latin: and, as I said, he is praising ancient Greek. The passage contains a number of long words. It will perhaps be best to explain them as we go along the first time, and then give the passage again, so that you can read it aloud to yourself and get the full roll and dignity of it.

### IX

"There never has been, there never will be, a language like the dead Greek. For Greek had all the merits of other tongues without their accompanying defects. It had the



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monumental weight and brevity of the Latin without its rigid unmanageability."

You can put things more shortly in Latin than in almost any language, and you can make quite trifling things sound tremendous; but it is a stiff language, and very hard to manage.

It had "the copiousness and flexibility of the German without its heavy commonness and guttural superfluity." By this Myers means that it was a plentiful language, and easy to manage, like German, but that it had not got the lumbering qualities of German, and was not all splattered with throat noises, "ichs" and "auchs" and so on.

It had "the pellucidity of the French without its jejuneness."

That means, it was clear like running water, as French is, without being thin.

It had "the force and reality of the English without its structureless comminution."

"Force and reality" is clear enough. "Structureless comminution" means that English is shapeless and broken up into small bits. Now we can allow Myers two or three sentences uninterrupted.

"But it was an instrument beyond the control of any but its creators. When the great days of Greece were past, it was the language which made speeches and wrote books, and not the men. Its French brilliance taught Isocrates to polish platitude into epigram."

Platitude means something quite obvious, and an epigram is a sentence which is witty and well pointed.

"Its German profundity enabled Lycophron to pass off nonsense as oracles. Its Italian flow encouraged Apollonius Rhodius to shroud in long-drawn sweetness the languor of his inventive soul."

There are two sentences more, but they are quite clear, and I will save them for the complete passage. Here it is:

"There never has been, there never will be, a language like the dead Greek. For Greek had all the merits of other

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tongues without their accompanying defects. It had the monumental weight and brevity of the Latin without its rigid unmanageability; the copiousness and flexibility of the German without its heavy commonness and guttural superfluity; the pellucidity of the French without its jejuneness; the force and reality of the English without its structureless comminution. But it was an instrument beyond the control of any but its creators. When the great days of Greece were past, it was the language which made speeches and wrote books, and not the men. Its French brilliancy taught Isocrates to polish platitude into epigram; its German profundity enabled Lycophron to pass off nonsense as oracles; its Italian flow encouraged Apollonius Rhodius to shroud in long-drawn sweetness the languor of his inventive soul. There was nothing except the language left. Like the golden brocade in a queen's sepulchre, its imperishable splendour was stretched stiffly across the skeleton of a life and thought which inhabited there no more."

Well—that is the grand manner, or, as it is sometimes irreverently called, the big bow-wow. It made a tremendous impression upon me when I read it first, such an impression that I copied it straight down into a notebook; and I still think it fine to-day. You could describe the Greek language differently, but the dignity and roll of that passage is a part of its meaning—good words in good order.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE AUTHOR AND HIS READERS

WHEN you are at school, and you write an essay or an exercise, you know quite well who is going to read it. Your teacher is going to read it. You know him or her, and you know what he or she likes.

Sometimes you have a completely free hand, and can write just what you want to. At other times, you have got to write what the teacher wants. You are not so much making something for yourself as writing out something you've been told. You have not a free hand to write what you please. But you know the person for whom you are writing, and you know what will please him or her—even though you may not always be able to do it.

## II

When an author writes a book, he is in a rather different position. He does not know who is going to read his book. And he is writing, not for one person, but for thousands. The nearest approach to the teacher that the author has to deal with is the reviewers, the people who are paid by newspapers and magazines to criticize books as they come out.

The teacher has to read what you write, because it is his duty. But the only people who have to read what the author writes are the reviewers, because it is their duty. These reviewers are rather like teachers sometimes, for they scold an author and blame him, they rap him over the knuckle, they sometimes even praise him; and very often they tell him what he ought to have done, and what he ought to do next time.

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But whereas you have one teacher to whom you show up your essay or your exercise, there are dozens and dozens of reviewers: and usually they contradict each other and tell the author quite different things, so that the poor man does not know what to be at next.

And, beyond the reviewers, come the public, the ordinary people who are either going to read the book or not. None of them is compelled to read the book. Each has to be persuaded. And none will buy the book, or ask for it at the library, unless he thinks it likely to be good. If he does not like it, then ten to one he will not ever look at one of that author's books again.

### III

This fact raises a tremendous question for the author. Since his book is going to be read by scores of different reviewers, and—he hopes—by thousands of different people, all unlike in their tastes and ideas, how on earth is he to please them all? You, if you are clever enough, can please your teacher by showing up the kind of work which you know he or she likes. The author cannot do this, because it is quite impossible to please everybody.

### IV

It is not too much to say that you can divide all authors into two groups, according to the way in which they answer that question of how to please the public.

One group shrugs its shoulders and says, "Bother the public. I'm going to please myself. I'm going to write the book I want to write, in the way I want to write it: and if people don't like it, they can jolly well lump it." This sort of writer we will call the Artist.

By artist I mean here the man who does the job for the job's sake, honestly, sincerely, to the very utmost of his ability, and to please himself. Even if he knew how to

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please the public, this type of writer would never do so if it meant watering himself down, so to speak: if it meant altering his view of things so as to fit in better with public taste: leaving out what he believed to be true, or putting in what he felt to be untrue. He would always write his book according to his own beliefs, and stand or fall by the result. If the public liked it, so much the better. If it didn't, well, then, that couldn't be helped.

And he would go on being himself, writing his own sort of books, to the very end, whether the public liked them or not, even if there were no one to publish them.

### V

The other type of writer, the man who answers the question of how to please the public in another way, we will call the Entertainer. His desire is, quite simply, to find what the public wants, and supply it. Since no one can supply what all the public wants, the Entertainer type of writer tries to find what one part of the public wants—the part which, if he is successful, he will call *his* public.

Having found this, either by luck or by design, he proceeds to give it exactly what it likes. Soon his part of the public knows exactly what to expect from him, and he goes on producing books, all more or less alike, for as long as he is able.

This type, the Entertainer, as you can see, takes a very different view of his work and his duties. His principal aim is to make money. He wants to find what is popular, and to supply it. The Artist, on the other hand, produces what he likes, and either hopes that the public will like it too, or doesn't care.

### VI

I must make one thing clear when I use the word Entertainer. I do not mean that the work of the Artist

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cannot be entertaining, in the sense of being interesting and amusing. I use the word *Entertainer* for the kind of writer who deliberately sets out to produce an article which he believes is wanted. The *Entertainer* considers his public all the time: the *Artist* considers the public only so far as good manners bid him, that is, to the extent of not putting unnecessary difficulties in the public's way—sometimes not even as much as that.

I think the best way to describe the attitude of the *Artist* type of author towards his reader is to imagine a man writing and allowing other people to look over his shoulder. He does not write deliberately *for* them to the extent of toning down or changing what he has got to say: but he knows that they are going to read it, and he does his best—or he should do his best—to see that anything he can do to make it easy and comfortable for them to read his work has been done.

## VII

At this point the reader may very well have a question to ask.

“But don't most authors write for a living?”

A great many of them do. Some, of course, have other jobs, and write as a hobby, or simply because they like it. But a great many write for a living.

“Well, then, what happens to them if they're the *Artist* kind of writer, and nobody buys their books? Surely, if you're trying to sell something, you have to please the people who are going to buy. It isn't reasonable to expect people to pay money to someone who, you say, isn't considering them at all. What happens?”

## VIII

That is a very reasonable question, and it brings us up against one of the oddest facts about writers and writing.

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This is, that, with few exceptions, the most popular writers, and the most successful, are those who from the very beginning have been of the Artist type and pleased themselves. It may have taken years for the public to come round to them, and to get to like their work. They may have had a terribly hard time before they were well known.

But, when the public does at last discover them, they have their reward: and they usually do very much better, and last far longer, than the Entertainers who have been giving the public what it wants.

## IX

There are two reasons for this. The first is that the writers who have been going their own way and pleasing themselves will have a personality and a point of view of their own, clear cut, and not like anyone else's. They will be real people, real writers, and their books will be real books.

Also, these writers are the people who form public taste, and develop it, and make it change from liking one thing to liking another. These writers, the best of them, at any rate, are ahead of public taste.

But the Entertainers follow public taste, and, therefore, they are apt to be behind the times. They do not last very well. When fashion changes, they are often left behind—since, after all, they are creatures of fashion. For a time they may manage to keep pace, but, sooner or later, they fall back, and then, because they have no real personality of their own, because they are only echoes and copies, because all they have learned is deliberately to manufacture a certain kind of article, they are done for.

I picked up the other day, in a second-hand bookshop, a copy of a book which achieved a tremendous popular success just over twenty years ago. For a few years the writer of this book was fashionable and made a great deal

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of money by writing a series of books just like the first. It gave me a melancholy feeling to buy a copy of this first book for a few pence, for I had met the author, more than once, a man grown old before his time, going round from one publisher to another to try to get his books published, and quite unable to understand what had happened to him.

His tragedy was that, twenty years ago, he learned how to give the public what it wanted: but there is a new public now, and it no longer wants the same things, and this poor man's books are as stale and out-of-date as tunes that everybody has long been tired of—not very good tunes, either. His books never had a personality and a character of their own, because they were always governed by the idea of pleasing a great number of people.

Now, if you are to please a great number of people, or, at any rate, if you are to avoid displeasing them, you must not be very definite one way or the other. You must not say anything that may give offence. You must not be too much on this side, or too much on that. In fact, you have to be a colourless sort of person. That is what this writer was. And that is what so many Entertainers are.

## V

Let me make quite clear, once more, that by Entertainers I do *not* mean people who write entertaining or amusing books. Some of the writers of amusing books are Artists in the best sense of the word. They have their own line of fun, and the public has come to like it. *I mean only those writers who start out quite deliberately to manufacture the sort of thing which the public seems to like at the moment.*

## VI

Of course, there are other sides to the author's relationship with his readers, such as the personal contact which



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he makes with readers as individuals. Every author has a number of friends whom he has never met. He probably has a great many whom he will never know about: in fact, he must have, since his books sell so many more copies than the people he can ever meet or receive letters from.

All writers have a number of readers whom they have never met, who write occasionally and say if they have liked what the writers have been doing. And all have a number of friends whom they have met through their writing. I, personally, know no feeling more satisfying than to meet someone who has liked one of my books. It is satisfying, because I know right away that that person is a real friend.

The author writes his book, working hard for weeks or months to say something which he has felt deeply and which he believes. Then, one day, someone comes along and proves that he or she has felt the same things, and believes them too.

It is a grand thing, when it happens, because it does away with all the preliminaries and he attempts to find out what each person thinks, and the two can start right ahead from the basis of the book.

And, when the book has been honestly written, the author has made a friend without trying to, and without going out of his way to please. He has made a friend because he is the sort of person that he is. And that is the best way to make a friend

## CHAPTER XIII

### GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

WE have now reached a point at which we can consider the business of writing as it is practised creatively. If up to this point I have seemed to insist on elementary points, on classroom points, it is for two reasons.

The first is that these elementary or classroom points are an essential part of all writing.

The second, which follows from the first, is that there is no real difference in kind between the writing done in the classroom and that done by the skilled writer.

It is the second of these statements that most people find difficult to swallow. Let me repeat it. *There is no difference in kind between the writing done in the classroom and that done by the skilled writer.* The schoolboy writing his essay in an exercise book and, let us say, Mr. Desmond MacCarthy writing his essay for next Sunday's paper, are doing exactly the same thing. Mr. MacCarthy does it a great deal better and a great deal faster, because, in addition to his native skill, he has had years of experience. But each is using words to say what he thinks about a given subject, in such a way as to communicate his thoughts to someone else.

Writing is not a sacred mystery. It is a method of expressing ourselves which lies open to anyone who has learnt to put words down on paper in recognizable form. Anyone who can write a letter home or write an intelligible sentence is on the way to becoming a writer—if he wants to—and to understanding and getting good from what other people have written.

I get impatient when people say, "It must be wonderful

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to be a writer!" or "If only I had your gift!" One must have a certain native ability, though in most cases I doubt if it can be more clearly defined than an overmastering wish to write and a deep interest in writing: but nine-tenths of this business of writing is sheer hard work.

You do not have to take that from me. The lives and writings of hundreds of writers prove it. Those who seem to write most easily will be found, as a rule, to have worked the hardest.

Writing is not a sacred mystery, hidden from all save a few brilliant initiates.

## II

If I do not believe that there is any essential difference between the writing done in the classroom and the writing of the skilled professional, why did I say in an earlier chapter that in this book I was looking at writing from the practical and creative rather than from the classroom point of view?

The answer is that, although there is no essential difference, some teachers by their methods have made a difference. There should be no difference. There is no difference. But English in the classroom has sometimes been made lifeless, a separate thing, like a pressed flower or a stuffed fish, instead of being treated as part of the live business of communication and of creating things.

When I was broadcasting to schools on the subjects which follow, there were teachers who complained that it was useless to talk to their classes about "the finer points of writing." *Those* are the enemies, teachers like that—who first of all distrust their classes, and keep them grinding away at dull and lifeless exercises which have no relation to creative work; and who do not realize that English is not just a subject, but everything we do and say and hear and hope for, and that therefore *all* English is interconnected and part of the great living whole.

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I have been a teacher, and I know the classroom. I am a writer, and I have practised every form of writing I talk about in this book, at any rate to the degree of making a living by it. And, believe me, there is no difference in kind between the two. There NEED be no difference. There SHOULD be no difference. There is no difference.

That is why anyone who can read and write is ready, if he will take note of certain elementary points, to approach the problems of creative writing in its many branches. And that is why these elementary points are a necessary part of the business of creative writing.

### III

And that is the only real answer I can give to two questions which I am continually asked in letters from listeners and others.

The questions are put in a variety of forms, but they boil down to two:

"Is the English work we do at school any real use to help me to become a writer?" *and*

"Did you find that school work helped you to learn to write?"

The second question implies the first, so that both may be answered together.

### IV

The answer depends very much on your teacher. When I was a boy, school work had far less to do with life in the real world than it has to-day: and everything depended on the teacher. Our English work was much stodgier; less time was given to it; it was looked on as of very little importance. That is not the case to-day. But a great deal depends on the teacher, always. If he or she is interested, your chances are good, and you will get help. If not, you will have to fend for yourselves.

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No teacher can do everything, for writing is one of the many things which come from within. *You* must be the writer. *You* must want to write. *You* must do the work.

The teacher is there to help, to see what you want to do and what you have it in your power to be, to help that gift to come out, to help that ambition to realize itself. But you must do the work; and you must *want* to do it. Remember our title—*English for Pleasure*. Your English, your writing must be for pleasure.

That certainly held good for me, when I was at school. The parts of my English work which I enjoyed helped me a great deal, as did the teachers who made it possible for me to enjoy them. The parts I did not enjoy did me no good at all.

For instance, a fool of a teacher made me learn a bit of Milton by heart before I was old enough to appreciate it. The effect was to put me off Milton for years, and ensure that I would not read a line of him.

I hated précis-writing, because the teacher did not relate it to anything in life. I got no good from "Grammar," so-called, because it was treated as a set of rules and exceptions, not part of the living language. Even at an early age, I fastened instinctively on those aspects of what I was taught that led to the wider world of books and writing.

For I always knew that I wanted to be a writer. I did not tell my parents. One does not tell one's parents that one wants to start on a career that is absolutely chancy, that has no fixed salary, no pension, no certainty that one will ever be employed. They would be bound to disapprove, unless they had plenty of money, which mine had not. So I kept my ambitions to myself, and worked away for the career my parents hoped I would choose. But I wanted to write. I read tremendously—every kind of thing, from thrillers and comics to classics. I admired writers, and the thought that one day I might perhaps meet one of the writers I admired thrilled me as deeply as

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anyone could be thrilled to meet a famous airman or soldier or explorer.

### V

I am not suggesting that such enthusiasm is needed in order to make a writer, still less in order to get benefit from books. Nor am I narrowing the purpose of this book so as to speak only to those who wish to become writers. I am speaking to everyone who is sufficiently open-minded as to consider the possibility that books have something to offer him, and that the language he speaks is worth and will repay a little attention.

All the same, my letter-box shows that the ambition to be a writer is widespread. Every week I get letters from people of all ages, sending me a manuscript to look at, and asking for an opinion on their chances. In ten days, including the day I am writing this, I have had four letters from girls—the youngest twelve, the oldest seventeen: one from a boy of sixteen: one from a labourer's wife, enclosing a story of her husband, without his knowledge: one from a lady of fifty-nine: two from ladies who do not give their age: and one from a gentleman of sixty-one.

The writers of all these letters enclose manuscripts—one sent a three-act play—and ask for criticism. And the younger correspondents almost always end up with the question, "Please, Mr. Strong, do you think I will ever be a writer?"

One of the letters I have just mentioned, from a girl, enclosed a story, and asked three questions.

1. Is it rubbish?
2. Is it worth while my going on?
3. Shall I ever be a writer?

I was able to tell her that her story was not rubbish, and that it was certainly worth her while to go on: but I could not answer the third question. She would have to answer that.

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Occasionally one can venture a prophecy, but very seldom: and, on those rare occasions, I think it is based on general character more than on a gift or a possibility which may easily fizzle out, and often does, for want of that real interest, that wish to go on, which marks the born writer.

### VI

The more I think of it, the more I come to believe that writing is a matter of character rather than an accomplishment. I do not mean that a good man is necessarily a good writer, or vice versa. Literary history would soon confute me if I did. I mean that writing is an expression of the whole personality of the writer, not an acquired trick like the power to balance a billiard cue upon one's nose.

(There *are* certain kinds of trick writing, but we need not concern ourselves with them here. By and large, they are not the kinds of writing you will get benefit from or wish to practise.)

Letters and manuscripts often come from people who hold the opposite view, and so distrust their own personality that they cannot put down a single sentence without twisting it and decorating it and dragging in all the long words and flowery metaphors they can think of. These people clearly regard writing as a trick, and are agonizingly self-conscious in their efforts to perform it. They have lost all sight of the real purpose of writing—to record and communicate what one has seen or felt or thought—and have come to think of it as some kind of an exhibition.

In some cases, I believe, this mistake has its roots in the classroom, where writing is sometimes studied in the wrong sort of way.

### VII

For instance, not long ago I received a letter from a schoolmaster, in which he questioned me about a passage

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in a short story which I had broadcast to schools during the summer holidays.

Here is the passage. The story is about a girl of twelve who went out one night in a boat to fish by herself. She has just got well out, clear of the land.

"The sun, which had sunk under a cloud, came out for a long minute on the ocean's rim behind her, and flooded the land and the mountains with unbelievable glory. The water around the boat took fire, the rocks turned almost blood-red, the white sands of the beach glowed a pale rose.

"Then, while she cleared her eyes with the back of her hand, the shadows on the mountain deepened, the whole panorama flushed darkly: hesitated: and the light, from the beach upward, went out as quietly and simply as a child goes off to bed. The whole coast seemed to shrink and huddle down into an angry blue, that would soon soften and darken into night."

Here are my correspondent's questions. (I must add in fairness that he wanted the answers, not for himself, but for his class.)

"What were you trying to do? Did you think you'd done it? Were you pleased with it when you'd finished it? If so, why? And if not, why not? Did you get some kick out of that simile of the child going to bed? And why did you use the word 'huddle'? Was there any conscious attempt to get a sort of dying fall at the end of the last sentence?"

## VIII

I am glad to have had his letter, because his questions show that, no doubt unconsciously, he was looking upon the process of writing as a kind of trick. He thought of a story as a *manufactured* thing.

Writers differ, of course, but in general we may say that there are two processes in creative writing. In the first, the writer is more or less excited, and tries to put



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down as clearly as possible the thing that is exciting him. In the second, he returns to what he has written, and reads it coldly and critically, trying to see it as if somebody else had written it.

The two processes are quite separate. My correspondent's questions seemed to relate entirely to the second process. He looked on creative writing, on the joy of making something, as a far more deliberate and cold-blooded business than it is—for me, at any rate. He looked on that passage, not as a manifestation of me, but as a trick I had learned to do.

However, let us take his questions one by one.

*What was I trying to do?* I was trying to put down exactly what the girl saw.

*Did I think I had done it?* I hoped I had given a good idea of it.

*Was I pleased when I had finished it?* That question does not make sense. The passage was not a thing in itself, it was part of a story, one of a series of experiences which the girl went through. I never thought of it separately at all. A short story is not a series of bits, but a complete thing. If the writer were pleased with one paragraph by itself, there would be something very wrong with his story.

*Did I get some kick out of the simile of the child going to bed?* That again separates the part from the whole, and I cannot answer it. I tried to suggest what the vanishing light looked like to the girl, and that was the best way I could find to do it.

*Why did I use the word "huddle"?* Because it was the right word to suggest what she saw happen to the land. I did not think up reasons for using it. The coast did huddle.

*Was there any conscious attempt to get a dying fall into the last sentence?* If a writer knows his business, the music and rhythm of his sentences will suit what they are about. He will do it by instinct. Writing is a *live* business, not a series of calculations.

IX

I am glad I got that letter, because it gives me a chance to explain something of the pleasure of writing. You see a thing, and you try to make words say what you see. You hear a thing, and you try to make words say what you hear. All these logic-choppings, all the whys and wherefores, come afterwards. You have to ask yourself two questions—the two with which my correspondent very properly began. What did I want to do? Have I done it?

Nine-tenths of all criticism lies in those two questions. If you can find a satisfactory answer—and that means, among other things, an honest answer—you can do no more. It then remains to be seen if other people find the same answers. If they do, then your story or essay or poem or novel has some value.

X

My correspondent asked two further questions, with which I finish this chapter. He wrote, "Do you get the same pleasure now from writing as you used to get at school? Did it last through the university, and afterwards?"

To both the reply is Yes. The pleasure has lasted. It became deeper and more intelligent as I learned more about writing and was able to give more time to it: but it remains the same feeling that I had when I first began.

So, when anyone asks if he or she will ever be a writer, I can only answer this:

If you enjoy making anything in words, if you get any fun from trying to put down on paper what you see and feel and hear, either in the outside world or in your imagination, then you have taken the first and biggest step to becoming a writer.

## CHAPTER XIV

### HOW A SHORT STORY WAS BORN

WHEN I was a schoolboy of eleven or twelve, an incident happened which remained in my mind ever since.

There was in one of the main streets of the town where I went to school a very large and prosperous pawnbroker's shop. It was got up like a silversmith's in front, and only a side entrance showed that it was a pawnbroker's. One of the advertisements in this side window said that the pawnbroker was anxious to buy foreign stamps. I collected foreign stamps, and it struck me that this would be a good way to make money with some of my swaps. So, one afternoon, when school was over, I plucked up my courage and went in to the pawnbroker with a selection which I offered him.

He gave my stamps one scornful glance, and said, "I am afraid those would be of no use to us. But perhaps you would like to see some of our Approval Sheets."

And in a few seconds I, who had come to sell, found myself invited to buy, and stood gazing dumbfounded at the sheets of stamps which he laid on the glass counter before me.

"Perhaps you would like to look over those and make up your mind," the pawnbroker suggested: and he went off to attend to the one other customer in the shop.

This was an elderly lady, who was standing nervously down at the far end. The pawnbroker went to her, and asked what he could do for her. She began to speak in a low, agitated voice that at once caught my attention: and while I stood pretending to stare at the sheets of stamps I both listened to and saw what followed.

The lady was neatly dressed, but I could see at once that she was not well off. She opened her bag, took from it something wrapped up in tissue paper, and unwrapped it. It was a long gold chain with a locket on the end, and I heard her ask the pawnbroker, little above a whisper, what he could give her for it.

I could guess at once that she had never done anything of the kind before, and what resolution it had taken to bring her to the pitch of trying to sell her treasure.

The pawnbroker picked up the chain and ran it through his fingers.

"Gold—ah, yes," he said, peering at it through a glass. "May I test it, madam?"

The lady looked startled, then recovered herself and said, "Of course."

The pawnbroker took a little bottle and poured something on to one of the links of the chain, and rubbed it with a file. Then he looked up.

"I am sorry, madam," he said, "but this chain is not gold."

The lady stepped back as if he had hit her, and uttered a sharp cry.

"Not gold! Are you . . . are you sure?"

"Positive, madam."

She stood for a moment, then snatched up the locket, crammed it into her bag, and ran out of the shop.

## II

That incident remained in my mind for at least twenty years. Then, when I had been writing for some time, it rose one day to the foreground of my mind, and suggested to me that I should make it into a story. It was the dramatic centre of a story, the heart of a story, as it were: but a great deal more was needed.

What had I got? An elderly lady, obviously very nervous and hesitating, goes into a pawnbroker's to sell a

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chain, believing it to be gold. When the pawnbroker tells her it is not gold, she is so stricken with horror that she cries aloud.

Certain obvious things sprang to my mind at once. I pictured the lady, who had once been quite well off, forced by necessity to go in the dusk of a winter afternoon, to wait till the shop was empty except for a little schoolboy, and then to try to sell her locket and chain. Surely nothing but terrible necessity would force her to such a step.

Was she doing it for herself, I wondered? Probably not: probably she needed the money for someone else. If that were so, it would help to account for that terrible cry of grief which I could still hear after twenty years. Such a cry I was sure could not have been wrung from her by mere disappointment on her own account. Indeed, I did not believe that, however desperately she needed the money, she could have been so shocked from her pride and self-restraint.

No—it must have been some deadly blow, some broken trust . . . and then, in a moment, I had my story.

### III

It ran like this. Two old sisters are living alone in a little flat, and one of them lies ill in bed. She lies tossing restlessly, because she knows what her younger, more practical sister is going to do.

Sure enough, in a few minutes the younger sister comes in to her.

“Louisa,” says the younger sister, “there is to be no more nonsense about it. We must sell the chain.”

The older sister knows the necessity, but from force of habit she argues. She protests that their dear brother, whom they so adored, and who now is dead, gave them the chain: and she cannot understand how Janet, the younger sister, can be so heartless as to want to sell it.

Janet is having no nonsense. Louisa has to listen while

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Janet tells her that the chain was not a gift at all, but the security for a loan. The brother was always extravagant—at least, it wasn't *his* fault, it was the fault of that horrible woman whom he married. He was just weak, poor darling. But Bessie, his wife—well, there, it doesn't do to speak ill about the dead. At any rate, when they both advanced him that large sum of money, he gave them the chain to keep, and told them, laughingly, that it would fetch much more than what they were lending him.

### IV

Louisa knows all this perfectly well, but she still argues. "You were always so hard on Bessie," she tells her sister.

Janet compresses her lips.

"I never liked her, I admit," she says. "I thought she was a vulgar, selfish woman, and I think so still. But even she wouldn't want us to keep the chain now. Your illness has cost money: there is the doctor's bill, and all the expenses from the grocer and the chemist for the special things you have had to have. I didn't like Bessie, and she didn't like me: but even she would not have wished me not to have enough to eat."

"Janet," cries Louisa, horrified, "Janet, my darling!"

"Yes," says Janet, who has flushed very red. "There's not been as much in the house as you thought."

Then, of course, Louisa is all tears and apologies. Janet, who doesn't like emotional scenes, takes advantage of the position at once, and says she will go out to sell the chain.

"But," says Louisa, "where will you go?"

For, of course, pawnbrokers' shops are a thing the sisters have been brought up to regard with horror.

But Janet knows where she will go. There is a jeweller's, quite a nice, respectable-looking place, where she feels sure she will be treated properly. Poor Janet, she has been looking for days past, trying to find a place, trying to

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summon up the courage for an errand which is all against her upbringing.

So, with Louisa telling her how brave she is, Janet goes out to sell the chain that will bring them more than enough to pay all their bills and buy for Louisa the nourishing things she needs for her convalescence.

Janet waits outside the shop until it seems to be empty, and then she goes in: and we know what happens. The chain is not gold: it is worth hardly anything.

### V

So far, we have been seeing everything from Louisa's point of view. Now we change over to Janet.

Janet hurries out of the shop, and wanders along the street, hardly able to see where she is going. After the first shock, a terrible question has risen in her mind. When dear William gave them the chain—did he know it was not gold?

Loyally she tells herself that of course he could not have known. It was Bessie, that vulgar, odious woman. *She* knew, and she deceived him.

Then poor Janet stops dead still on the pavement, so that passers-by bump into her. She remembers, as clearly as if it were an hour ago, that interview when William borrowed the money from them and gave them the chain. She remembers every tone of his voice, every flicker in the eyes that would not meet hers and her sister's. The awful truth breaks in on her.

"He knew," she whispers, standing there on the edge of the pavement, staring back into the past. "He knew the chain was not gold."

### VI

I sent the story off at once to an editor. To my surprise, it came back. I sent it to three or four more, and it came

back each time. Editors do not generally bother to tell young writers why they refuse their stories, so I was completely bewildered. I tried it a few more times, then gave it up as a bad job.

Then, one day, I was talking to A. E. Coppard, whom I have long regarded as one of the very best short story writers in English. Incidentally, Coppard is a notable instance of the tenacity of purpose that marks the born writer. When he was young, he worked in an iron foundry. He was a good runner, and he used to run professional races, and buy books with his prize money. With these he taught himself to write.

I told Coppard my story, and he liked it very much. He, too, could not understand why editors sent it back. He asked me a few more questions, then slapped his knee.

"I've got it!" he said. "You've split the interest. You begin with one sister in bed, and then, when you've got the reader's mind fixed on her, you switch over to the other: and that breaks your story in half."

## VII

I saw at once that he was right: and he went on to explain that, in his belief, you must always write a short story from one point of view. You can either stand away from all your characters, and tell the reader about them all equally, being the creator of your own world and of the people in it: or you can tell the story from the point of view of one character, seeing everything through his or her eyes.

What you must not do is to change over from one character to another. By starting with Louisa and going on with Janet, I had broken my story into two.

I went home at once, and re-wrote the story from the point of view of Janet. I began with her going to a locked drawer, and, after several hesitations, taking out the chain: then thinking of the arguments with which to convince her sister who lay ill in the next room. The one thing she must



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not say was that she, Janet, has been going short of food in order that Louisa might have all the dainties she needed.

However, when she goes in to Louisa, irritation at all the same old things about William and Bessie coming up all over again makes her blurt out what she had resolved to keep hidden. She wins her argument, and goes out: and the rest of the story follows as before.

## VIII

This change had the advantage of making the story all of a piece. When I said just now that editors refused the story in its first form, I did not mean that their approval or disapproval was necessarily a standard of merit. Editors buy or refuse to buy for special reasons of their own, reasons far too complicated for us to go into here.

But this rule of Coppard's is a rule of art, and my story was a better story in the second version, because it became a single experience in the life of a single character, instead of two fragments, each from a different story, fastened together in the middle.

## IX

This is of course only one story out of many that could be written about the incident which I saw in the pawnbroker's shop. There might easily have been no sister and no brother. The chain might have been a present from a sweetheart—though in that case there would have to be somebody else for whom the money was needed, for the lady whom I saw would have died sooner than sacrifice a present from her sweetheart. There are all kinds of possibilities.

I wonder how you would have written the story? I wonder how you would have explained the incident in the shop? Try to think. Or think how you would explain any queer isolated incident you have seen yourself. Because that is one of the ways in which short stories are born.

## CHAPTER XV

### ANOTHER SHORT STORY

HOW was the incident in the last chapter built up into a story? By letting it spread in my mind, as ripples spread over a pond when you drop a stone in. The incident was the stone, and my mind was the pond.

The ripples did not spread at once. They waited for twenty years, so that the comparison breaks down there: but it holds in other ways, for the incident was neither the beginning nor the end of the story. Things had to spread out on either side of it, in order to make sense of it: to reach a story of which it should be a logical part, not just something that happened.

## II

This is a point of the first importance. In a story, you can't have things that just happen, plop, for no reason. What happens must mean something, must belong to the rest of the story, must grow out of the beginnings of the story and lead towards the end.

A story reveals to us the sense and the meaning of a part of life. We see the things in order. We see how a motive grew in someone's heart and led to a deed and its results. In real life, the person would perform all sorts of actions in between which had nothing to do with the growth of this purpose, which, from the point of view of that purpose, had no meaning. In the story, we leave them out because they are things that just happen. They have nothing to do with what the story is about.

If you are painting a scene in a beautiful old town, and

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the Council's watercart comes and stays for a while in front of you, you do not put it in your picture. It is not part of your picture, it is something that just happens, and has nothing to do with your purpose. One of the first jobs of a short story writer is to remove these watercarts, so to speak: to clear away the things that just happen, and get a pattern in which everything makes sense.

### III

There are dozens of books about the writing of short stories, and they are full of sound advice. I never got much good out of them, partly because I did not read any of them till I had been writing for some years, and partly because they are too general. They tell you to do this, and not to do that—but they do not give enough examples.

I believe the only way to help people who want to write is to show them what writers do in order to turn their ideas into stories. When I began to write short stories, I found it terribly hard to get ideas. I did not realize that I was getting plenty of ideas, but that I could not recognize them as ideas. I had not enough practice. I saw the stone fall into my mind, but I did not know how to let the ripples spread and make sense of it.

### IV

Let me give you another example. Let me tell you another thing I saw when I was a small boy: another stone from which the ripples did not spread till many years afterwards.

I was on the Sea Wall at Kingstown, as it was then called. It runs along the shore, and, at the place where I was, it was about four feet above the rocks. Two very poor and ragged boys were squabbling a few yards away from me. They were brothers, one three or four years older than the other. The squabble turned into a fight,

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and the older boy began to beat the younger and make him yell.

Close by were two or three men, smoking and talking. One of them turned round, and saw what was happening. He took his pipe out of his mouth, walked across to the boys, and coolly kicked the bigger boy off the edge of the wall, just as you or I might kick a tin or a piece of wood. He then put his pipe in again, and walked back to the others, and went on talking as if nothing had happened.

The next thing was that the small boy ran at him and started screaming and beating with his fists at the back of the man's legs—the highest point he could reach. The three men turned and laughed, and then the bigger boy climbed up. He was crying, and limping, but he was not badly hurt. He cursed the men. The man threatened him, and both boys slowly went away, turning every now and then to yell abuse.

### V

That was the incident. Not a story. Just a thing that happened. Told as I have just told it, it does not make sense.

Who were the boys? Why were they fighting? What happened afterwards? Scores of questions arise—ripples on the pond. I did not start asking myself these questions till many years afterwards.

Then, one day, my imagination got to work. The ripples began to spread in my mind, with the incident I've just told you as their centre.

### VI

What had I to do to make this incident into a story? I had to supply a setting, a background, a series of events of which the incident would be the centre, and which would give it sense and meaning.

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Had I any other facts to help me? What did small boys do down on the Sea Wall? They fished for little fish, they hunted for crabs and shrimps and prawns. Prawns—like big shrimps: my fisherman friend called them Prongs. Wouldn't that be a good title? The little boy, calling them Prongs, not able to pronounce the proper word, or getting it wrong?

What sort of boys were they? Ragged, poor—they would come from the tumble-down cottages not far from my grandfather's garden. Their father—he might well be one of the drunken, bawling brutes I could sometimes hear kicking up a row there on a Saturday evening.

Then I had my start.

## VII

The two boys were down on the Sea Wall. Dan, the elder, was in charge of little Johnny, with strict orders to bring him home in time for dinner. The very first words of the story are Dan telling Johnny to come on home out of that. But Johnny is busy catching prawns, which he calls prongs. He is squatting over a pool. He has caught five or six, and is stalking the last and biggest in the pool. So he does not want to come.

Danny looks at him angrily. Johnny has no idea of time, is always late, and gets him into trouble. Only the other day Dan got a beating from his father on Johnny's account. So he refuses to wait. He hustles the protesting Johnny off—Johnny hugging his prawns to his bosom.

When they have to climb up on the Wall, Dan catches Johnny's arm to help him up, and makes him drop the prawns on the seaweed. Johnny utters a wail, and goes down to pick them up, but Dan, terrified of being late, yanks him off. Johnny yells blue murder, and throws himself down on the ground. Dan smacks him. Johnny bites Dan. Dan hits him very hard indeed.

Then the incident happens which I saw. The man, one

of a group standing close by, kicks Dan off the wall, and is attacked by Johnny.

## VIII

When Dan climbs back, he threatens the man that he will tell his father.

"Wait till yet get a puck of Jem Foster's fist in yer gob!" he cries. "Then we'll see what ye'll do!"

Jem Foster! The men look at each other uncasily. Jem Foster is a big tough man, and has a bad reputation as a bully and a bruiser. A bad man to quarrel with. So they try to conciliate the boys, to make up the quarrel. But the boys, seeing their advantage, follow it up, dancing and yelling their father's name as if it were a battle-cry.

The men have a whip round and offer the boys a sixpence and some coppers. At once the boys' manner changes. But Dan has the pride of the very poor. His father would never let him take a gift of money. So there's a deadlock—until Johnny suddenly startles them by shouting, "Me prongs! Me prongs!" He jumps off the Wall and grovels in the weed to pick them up.

He finds them, and offers to sell them to the men. This will make it all right. They can take the money, if they give something in exchange.

So the man takes the prawns which he doesn't want, and the boys take the money, and promise to say nothing to their father.

It is terribly late when they get home, and their father, without a word, starts to undo his belt. But Johnny forestalls him, giving the money into his hand, and explaining that they stayed to catch the prawns for a man who wanted them. Jem Foster is in two minds—but money is money, and he would like a drink. So, to the tremendous relief of poor Mrs. Foster, who has been terrified that the boys will be beaten again, he growls, pockets the money, and goes off to the pub.

## ANOTHER SHORT STORY

### IX

Well—that made sense of the incident on the Sea Wall, and yet it did not seem quite complete. It wanted something to finish it off—a quiet end; something to show the real affection between the brothers: so I added this:

“After they had eaten, they climbed a little way up the hill, past the tethered goat, to a grassy place between grey rocks, from which they had a wide view of the harbour and the sea—climbing slowly, for Dan’s hurts were stiffening, and he hobbled painfully on the slope. They sat down together, facing the sea, in silence. It was a dead calm, and very clear. The horizon was a dark line drawn between sea and sky, and a ship which had sunk below it left a dark blue smudge of smoke, faint, motionless, incredibly distant.

“Presently Johnny moved closer to his brother.

“‘I’m sorry, Danny,’ he whispered. ‘Is your hurts painin’ ye? I’m sorry.’”

“Dan did not seem to have heard; he still looked out to sea; but after a few moments his arm moved around Johnny’s neck, and he began absentmindedly to stroke his hair. With a sigh of happiness, the little boy snuggled closer, and shut his eyes.”

### X

There was my story. The ripples had spread on each side of the incident. The story gave what led up to the incident of the kick, and what followed after it. Of course, a hundred different stories could be written round that incident: but this was mine. These were the ripples which spread from it in my mind.

The whole art of writing short stories is to observe and recognize an incident; to remember it; and then to let the ripples spread. Sometimes the incident will have in it

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something that is accidental, that does not really belong to it, like the watercart in the square. A lot of skill and experience is often needed to spot these accidents, to sort them out, and get rid of them.

I have a friend who tells me things he sees and that happen to him, in case I can write them up and make them into stories. Sometimes they are so full of vivid accidents—they have so many bright and amusing watercarts in them—that it takes me a year or more to get them sorted out in the back of my mind, to know which things to choose and which to leave out.

For nothing can be allowed in a story, however vivid or exciting or amusing, unless it is a real part of the story: unless it makes sense, that is to say, unless it depends on what has gone before and leads up to what comes after. And that, of all the laws of short story writing, is the hardest one to learn. I have not learned it yet. I have written well over a hundred short stories, and I am still learning, and I shall go on learning (I hope and pray) till I die, or get so silly that no one will publish my stories any longer.



## CHAPTER XVI

### MAKING A FILM

I EXPECT that every reader of these pages has been to the movies and seen a film. In this chapter I want to consider the difference between a film story and a story in a book, and give you some idea of how a film is made. We shall begin with how the film is written—because it has to be written, every word of it, with full directions for the position of the camera in every shot; and go on in the next chapter to see how it is actually photographed in the studio.

Let us see, first of all, what happens when the film company buys a story and hands it over to its own writers for what the studios call “treatment.”

## II

There are certain differences between a book and a film—or a play—which we must realize from the very start. A story in a book is written to be read. A story told by means of a play or a film is written to be seen and heard. In a book, you can stop to explain anything you want to, and tell the reader all about what happened before the book began. You cannot do this in a play or a film. Everything has to happen and be said in front of the people who are looking on.

For instance, in a book you might begin like this:

“It was a winter’s afternoon in the year 1897, and the lamps were just being lit in the drawing-room of Mr. Paul Smith’s house in Wimbledon.”

You could then go on for a page and a half to describe

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the drawing-room, and explain the relationship of all the people sitting in the room, and so on and so forth: so that, by the time you were ready to begin your story, the reader would know all about the characters.

### III

If, on the other hand, you were writing your story as a play, the curtain would go up and show the Smiths' drawing-room. The furniture and the dress of the two or three people sitting in the room would suggest the date. The maid would be lighting the lamps, and one of the characters would say something about tea-time, from which the audience could decide for themselves that it was winter.

The girl sitting close by the fire would call the older lady Mother, and the audience would immediately know that they were mother and daughter. Then a gentleman would come in with a newspaper—greeted by the girl as Uncle Fred—and he would look at his paper and say, "These confounded Boers are getting very troublesome": and the audience, most of whom would know within a couple of years when the Boer War started, would then know exactly where they were.

### IV

You see, it is a different sort of writing altogether. It consists in *showing* people things, instead of *telling* them. The same holds good of a film—with the one big difference that the camera can move about.

It can show the audience something from quite close, in a way that is impossible on the stage: it can, for instance let the audience have a look at what is written in the letter that the heroine is holding in her hand, whereas the audience in the theatre can only just see that she has a letter in her hand: and it can follow the characters about.

## MAKING A FILM

On the stage, you have very few scenes, and the characters have somehow to be brought into them. In a film, you have hundreds of scenes, and can move from one to another in less than a second.

On the stage, you can only show Uncle Fred going out of the door and slamming it after him. In a film, you can follow him into the passage, can watch him put on his hat and coat, go down the steps after him, and into the 'bus and off to the lawyer's office, or wherever it is he is going.

### V

Now, bearing these differences in mind, let us consider what first has to be done when a film company buys from a writer permission to make his story into a film. The ordinary novel has in it anything from seventy thousand to a hundred thousand words. The ordinary play has from twenty to thirty thousand words. The ordinary film has even less—that is, if you count only the words spoken by the characters.

The last time a film company commissioned me to write them a special story to be made into a film—as sometimes happens, when no novel is suitable for what they want—they asked for ten thousand words, or more if I felt it necessary, and I gave them fifteen thousand. Mind you, that was written out as a story; not in the way a film is written. It was not the actual script from which the work is done in the studio.

### VI

The reason why a play is so much shorter than a novel is that it has to fit into a certain time on the stage, which is seldom more than two and a half hours. It cannot therefore, be longer than the amount that people talking at the normal rate can say in two and a half hours. A film tends to have even less words than a play because it does

not last as long, and also because a good deal of the story is told in action, with little or no dialogue. A great part of any film script is taken up with giving directions to the camera-man and to the actors as to what they are to do.

## VII

The actual words used to tell the story, then, may be only one-tenth as many as those taken in the book. Obviously, therefore, it will be impossible to get the whole story into the film. The first thing you have to decide is which are the best parts of the story from the film point of view.

When you have, as it were, filleted the novel, and got its bare bones, you may find that certain changes have to be made, if the story is going to make sense in its new and shorter form. I do not for a moment mean that all the changes which film companies make in stories are either sensible or necessary. Sometimes they are simply idiotic, and spoil the story altogether. But there are silly people in every profession, and you cannot expect the films to be any different in that respect.

Still, changes often have to be made: so the first thing the film people do is to get their writers in the studio to prepare a *précis* or synopsis of the story as it is going to be filmed.

Once this satisfies the director, the next stage is to put in the dialogue. Usually for the first attempt they put in what is called plot dialogue, that is, only as much as is necessary for the actual working-out of the story.

Then the script is handed to another writer to put in character dialogue, that is, to polish up this dialogue which has simply been used for telling the story, and make each character say what he or she actually would have said as a living person. For instance, one character may be a colonel in the army, another a Yorkshire farmer, and so on and so forth. In the plot dialogue they may all have been made to

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speaking very much alike. In the character dialogue, they will speak lines appropriate to their character and environment.

### VIII

The script will go through a good deal of knocking about, of re-writing, and revising, and quite possibly extra writers will be called in to do various little jobs of work on it. For instance, I was once called in to a script that in every other respect was finished and passed as satisfactory, because one of the most important characters somehow had not come out very well. As you can imagine, when a hundred-thousand-word novel is cut down to little more than a tenth of its length, some of the characters get squeezed a bit thin. Also, for this particular character a famous Irish actor had been engaged, and the character in the book and in the script was a Cockney. The part had, therefore, to be re-written, and a few short scenes added, to suit this particular Irish actor.

### IX

And so we come to the actual shooting script from which the work in the studio is done. By the shooting script, I mean the whole book of the words—description of each shot, what the characters are to do, and what they are to say. Each scene is numbered. Each begins with precise directions, whether it is a Long Shot, that is, with the camera at a distance; whether it is Medium, which explains itself; or whether it is Close-up: whether the camera is focused from any particular angle, whether the camera moves, and if so, how it moves. You will have seen plenty of shots, in which the camera, starting at a distance, gradually comes closer to the object or person which is important, and others in which it swings from one side to another.

These directions will be followed by the names of the

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characters who are in the scene, what they are doing, and, last of all, what they say.

### X

Now for an actual example of how a film starts to tell its story. With so short a space to work in, a film must introduce its characters to the audience as quickly as possible.

The principal characters in the novel we have to film are a man of great strength, living with his parents in a little cottage on the western coast of Scotland. The heroine is a girl, an orphan, who was sent to the family to look after from a convent in one of the big cities when she was still a child. The father is a fisherman like his son, and he also makes illegal whisky, which the pair of them transport by boat at night, keeping a sharp watch for the Customs men who would arrest them. Nearly all their neighbours make whisky, too: and soon after the story begins, the Customs men make a raid on one man, and the people suspect that he has been betrayed by an informer.

Now—how can we start off our film so as to give the audience these facts in the shortest possible time, introduce them to the main characters, and give them the atmosphere of the story?

### XI

We can do it like this. The camera opens on a beautiful stretch of beach, with mountains in the background. It swings slowly, giving more and more of this grand view, and comes to rest on two old men trying vainly to move their boat, which has got its keel stuck in the sand.

The next shot shows the hero striding over the sandhills, carrying a hank of fish in his hand and whistling. In another shot, from a different angle, and showing more of the view, he sees the two old men pulling at their boat.

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He changes his course, comes up to them, swings his hank of fish from his right hand to his left, grasps the stern of the boat, and, with a single heave of his one hand, lifts her out of the sand.

The old men burst into delighted exclamations. "My, but you are a strong man, Fergus Macrae!"

You notice that these are the first words spoken in the film. Already, in the first minute and a half, we have told the audience that the hero is a fisherman, that he lives in beautiful country, that he is very strong, and that he is called Fergus Macrae.

## XII

Next, we see a fisherman's cottage on a slope above some rocks. Fergus strides into the picture, making for the cottage. At the foot of the slope just above the rocks is a heap of lobster-pots. Fergus goes up to them, looks round to make sure that no one is looking, and pulls a couple of the pots aside. The camera goes up close, and we see a stone jar of whisky. He covers it up again, and goes up towards the cottage.

Inside the cottage, a girl is getting a meal ready by the fire. Fergus comes in and throws his fish on the wooden table. The girl scolds him affectionately and takes them off, and rubs the table with a cloth. Fergus laughs.

"Och," he says, "I am not equal to your fine city manners."

They squabble a little more, laughing. Then the girl's face changes, and she says anxiously, "Have you to go out again to-night?"

He says he has, and she says that she can never sleep when he and his father are out on those errands.

"Och, don't worry," he says: "the Customs men will never catch him."

XIII

Now—in that short space we have prepared the audience for the business about the informer which is coming. We have told them that the girl is not a member of the family, and have suggested how fond she is of Fergus. In fact, we have given all the essentials, inside a space of three or four minutes. A film has to get off the mark very quickly.

In the next chapter, we will go into the studio, and watch the actors and the camera-men at work.



## CHAPTER XVII

### A VISIT TO A FILM STUDIO

WE arrive at the studio in the middle of the morning, show our passes to the doorkeeper, and go to the room of one of the studio writers, who is going to take us in to the actual stage and set, as it is called, where the work is going on. He leads us across a big yard to a queer-shaped high building that is not like a house, nor like a cinema, nor like anything that one can think of. We go in at one door, and reach another with a red light outside it and all kinds of terrific notices saying SILENCE, and telling us of the fearful things that will happen if we so much as whisper, or let our shoes squeak.

Our guide does not seem to be impressed. He pushes his way in, and at once we are greeted by an absolute babel of noise. We cannot see anything much, although there is a tremendous blaze of light coming from behind a lot of high wooden walls and palings and beams and goodness knows what else.

"Mind you don't trip up," says our guide, and leads us around, stepping carefully over ropes and wires and pulleys and boxes, until we come on to the set itself, where, in a dazzling light, we see one of the maddest-looking scenes you can imagine.

## II

At the back is a street—or rather, a bit out of a street. It looks as if a giant had gone out and cut off three or four shops and houses, with a length of pavement and a pillar-box and a lamp-post or two.

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Beyond the two ends of this slice of street are cameras, cranes, pulleys, barrows, chairs, and people sitting about, knitting or reading, and taking no notice whatever of a number of men in shirt sleeves or pullovers, who are shouting at each other and pushing things about. Past one end of the street stands a cab, with an old horse dozing between the shafts, and leaning up against props and errand boys' bicycles, a barrow of fruit, and various other objects.

Getting used to the glare and the noise, we look around to see if any of the cameras are at work. Our guide tells us that nothing is being taken at the moment, but that they are getting ready to take a scene just over there.

We look where he points, and see another funny cut-off bit of the street, all by itself: half a cottage, with a little bit of sloping ground, made of earth, and obviously built up specially for the purpose. The camera, an immense thing like a small railway truck, and, like a railway truck, running on wheels, is being rolled up towards this bit of cottage, and a number of people are fussing round it and shouting at each other like all the rest.

### III

We ask our guide where the actors are, and he points to a sofa and a little group of canvas chairs some distance beyond the cottage. We go over, and find that they are practising the lines which have to be said in the scene which is just coming.

"They don't learn their lines beforehand," our guide tells us. "At least, if there's a notice up on the board saying what scenes are going to be taken the next day, they may have a look at them. But they don't get much time. We didn't finish till eight o'clock last night, and they had to be on the set, ready made-up, in time to start at nine sharp this morning. It takes an hour to get here from London, as you know: and as most of the make-ups take

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another hour, you can see that they have to get up pretty early in the morning."

"But how do they manage, if they don't learn their lines beforehand?"

"This scene only has five lines," says our guide, "and very few scenes have more than ten at the most. It's easier to learn them immediately beforehand. Besides, then the director can tell them exactly how he wants the lines spoken, before they've had time to get used to any idea of their own."

### IV

We go up close to the group, and listen. The scene of the film is laid in Ireland, and the chief character is a rather grand old lady who takes very little notice of the fact that she no longer has any money, and so is in constant difficulties with the local tradesmen.

The actress playing this part is not Irish, and so she has to be taught the accent for every line. An actor has been brought over specially from Dublin to help her and the two or three other actors who are not Irish.

The director of the film, a young man in a shabby pull-over and very dirty flannel trousers, is making sure that they are ready to start.

"Now, Mary darling," he says to the chief actress, "are you ready?"

"Yes, Harold dear," she says. "Oh, just one minute, Michael—how does that line go again?"

The Irish actor says it for her. "Indeed then, I'll do no such thing."

She repeats the words after him—such a perfect copy that it makes us jump.

"That's it," she says. "I couldn't get the drop of my voice at the end."

And, still muttering the line over to herself, she gets up and walks on to the set with the girl who plays in the scene with her.

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### V

So far, they have just been rehearsing the words. Now, in front of the critical eye of the director, they rehearse the words and the actions which go with them. The two stand for a minute talking outside the cottage: then the old lady takes three steps forward, and bangs her umbrella indignantly on the ground, and says the line we have just heard.

The two actresses go through their lines several times until the director is satisfied that these movements are natural. Then they go to the real place, where the scene is to be photographed, and do them there.

### VI

Now begins a most tricky and complicated business. The focusing of these huge and delicate cameras needs the utmost accuracy. Two or three inches out of place will make all the difference between a good picture and a bad. It is absolutely essential, then, that the old lady's three steps shall finish up in exactly the same place, almost to an inch. So they begin by making a chalk mark on the ground from where she and her companion are to start, and another chalk mark on which she is to put her foot at the end of the three steps.

The camera is wheeled into position—it is to swing with her as she makes her three steps—but, as the old lady is supposed to be angry during the scene, it is not possible for her to look carefully where she is going. Three times running she steps too far, and the next time not far enough. So the director gets some little wooden pegs, and drives them into the ground, at the exact spot where her right foot has to stop. That settles it. She can now take her three steps, feeling with her right foot for the pegs, and stopping dead as soon as she finds them.

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She does this twice—the whole scene, and all the words being said over each time—then the camera-man complains that the lighting is not quite right. There is already a terrific glare and heat from the concentration of the huge lamps. It is so hot that every couple of minutes little beads of sweat burst out on the faces of the two actresses, and their dressers rush forward with powder puffs to repair the damage.

### VII

The lights are moved into a slightly different position, and the camera-man says that he is satisfied. We imagine that now at last the picture will be taken—but, oh dear, no. There is still the sound.

A different lot of men wheel up another machine, and the microphone comes poking out on the end of a thing like a long fishing-rod, and hangs in the air above the two actresses' heads.

It, as well as the camera, has to move with them when they take their three steps forward, or the sound will come out unevenly in the finished film. No fewer than five more rehearsals are necessary before both sound-man and camera-man are completely happy. Then, at last, all is ready.

In a dead silence, during which the two dressers again rush busily forward with their powder puffs, a young man steps forward with a kind of notice board on which is the number two hundred and one—the number of that particular shot. Each shot, or separate scene, has its number photographed on to it, so that it will not get mislaid, or put in the wrong place, when the film is finally put together. The bits of the film with the number on are, of course, cut off, as soon as all the shots have been arranged in the right order.

VIII

Once again, the scene goes through. We know the five lines by heart now, and are thoroughly sick of them, but the actress, who has been standing about now for more than an hour, saying her lines obediently over and over again, says them now as if for the first time. Even so, the director is not satisfied, and the scene is played three times more before he nods his head.

"Have an easy for a moment, Mary darling," he says, and the old lady moves off thankfully.

It sounds strange at first to hear all the actresses being called "darling," and all the actors called by their Christian names, and usually with "old boy" tacked on to the end of it, but one can soon see that there is something real behind it.

These people work under such trying conditions, they need such patience, and such power to withstand being tired, that anything which sounds like human sympathy and affection is a help. It helps them to keep their tempers, it persuades them that the director sympathizes with their difficulties, as they do with his.

In five minutes, the actors and actresses are studying the next scene, and getting their words ready. It is nearly lunch-time, and there will not be time to start photographing it till afterwards: but, if they have their words ready, they will be able to start at two o'clock with the photographing.

IX

When we get back, a little after two, we find that this time the big street scene is to be used.

The extras, as they call those players who do not have speaking parts, are ready, behind the counters of the little shops, and at the ends of the street. A donkey-cart has appeared, which the chief comedian has to drive in at once

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end of the street, pulling up suddenly when he meets the old lady, who proceeds to call him names.

The cameras will be focused on them, but, in the meantime, all the usual business of the street has to go on behind them.

This business is rehearsed first. A postman comes along and clears the letters out of the pillar-box. Two old women go along with their shopping baskets, and stop doubtfully outside one of the shops, while the shop man tries to persuade them to buy something. An errand boy goes by on a bike, and several people pass up and down the pavement.

All these movements are timed with a stop watch. The actors who have to make them stand outside the range of the camera, at the ends of the street. Nothing is left to chance. Behind each of them stands an assistant, who, at a sign from the assistant director, gives each one a little push at the precise second when he or she is to start. What on the screen looks like a number of people casually sauntering about, as in a real street, is really a sort of drill, worked out to the precise second, and rehearsed for a good hour before it is ready.

## X

All sorts of difficulties crop up before this scene can be taken. The donkey in the cart has different ideas from the director, and refuses to start when he should. Everything ~~is held~~ up while the actors try to persuade him, but he plants his four little hooves firmly on the ground and declines to budge.

"All right," says the director, "push the cart on from behind."

But the donkey knows better. They can push him on, but they cannot make him look as if he were going of his own accord. He sticks his legs out stiffly, and arrives on the scene as if he were skating. There is a great roar of laughter, and they try all over again.



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When the moment comes, the donkey is prodded sharply behind. The result of this is too much of a success, for he bolts full gallop across the stage, and does not stop at all.

In the end, they give up the idea of driving him on, and decide to photograph the scene with him already there.

### XI

Another three-quarters of an hour go by, getting everything ready for the sound and the camera, and at the last moment the camera-man complains that one of the shop windows is reflecting the light and making a dazzle. The director, who by now is impatient, remedies this by going over and putting his boot through the window. The camera-man then complains that he can see through to some of the scenery behind. Finally a rag is stuffed in the window, and, at long last, the real work begins.

It would take far more space than is left to tell you of the things that go on in the studio, and the difficulties the actors have to face: the difficulty, for instance, of playing a love scene in the presence of a number of perspiring men in pullovers who keep shoving you about, and making you do it over and over again, until you and the heroine are heartily sick of one another, and you have a crick in your neck and pins and needles in your legs, and have to keep on saying your one line again and again in tones of passionate delight.

Still, I hope that the little I have told you will give you some idea of the difficulties of making a film, and will show you how desperately hard the actors and actresses have to work. They get high salaries, it is true: but I do not know any class of people who work harder to earn their money.

And when it comes to the extras, the people who play in crowd scenes and walk about in the background, who have to be on the set just as early as anybody else, and leave just as late, who have to pay their fares to and from the studio and their meals all out of a guinea a day, and who think

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themselves incredibly lucky if they get two days' work a week—when it comes to them, you can see that acting for the films is no sort of an easy job.

## XII

What has this to do with English and with writing? Everything. The English in which a film script is written is meant to be used. It is nothing in itself. It needs the camera and the microphone to make it real and to give it life. •

And the script is all important. Victor Savile, one of the ablest directors this country has produced, has given it as his opinion that the director's most important work is done on the script, and that a good script is three-quarters of a good film.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### STORIES AND PLAYS

IN the talk about making a book into a film, I mentioned certain differences between the way a story is written to be printed, and the way a play is written to be acted on the stage. Let us now go a little further into these differences, by taking the two sorts of play and story that are most alike, that is, the short story and the one-act play, and seeing how, and where, they differ.

#### II

First of all, let us see how far they are alike. A short story takes one idea, or one incident, or perhaps, one main character, and gives the reader a completed experience connected with that character or incident or idea.

I will try to put it more clearly. A short story called *Mr. Brown's Day Out* would take one day in the life of one chief character, Mr. Brown, and describe it in such a way as to give you a complete idea of Mr. Brown and his surroundings, and the sort of life he led.

A short story called *The Stolen Will* would probably be some kind of a puzzle, solved satisfactorily on the last page, about one central thing—that is, the will that was stolen.

My own short story, *The Chain*, which I described to you in an earlier chapter, told what happened when two old ladies were forced, at last, to try and sell the chain, supposed to be made of gold, which their brother, many years before, had given them as security for a loan.

A famous short story by the American writer, O. Henry, describes what happens when a young husband and wife,

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very much in love, are wondering how to give each other a really good Christmas present. The husband has a gold watch, of which he is very proud, but he has no chain to match it. The wife has lovely hair, of which she is very proud, and one day she sees in a shop window a pair of beautiful and expensive combs that would suit it perfectly, only she cannot afford to buy them.

You can guess what happens. The husband sells his gold watch, so as to get the money to buy her the beautiful combs. The wife sells her hair to the hairdresser, so as to get the money to buy him the watch chain.

A short story, then, is something complete about a single thing, or idea, or person, or group of people. That is, on the whole, a safer way to describe it than to say what its length should be.

### III

A one-act play is exactly the same, with the important difference that it is written to be acted. It, too, must keep to one main subject, and go straight on with the business of that subject, never turning aside to talk about anything else.

The short story and the one-act play are each one movement. A problem of some kind is stated. The characters want, or have to, do something. A man and a girl are in love and want to get married: something has been stolen and the characters want to find it: a man sees an obstacle between him and his ambition, and must move it. Once the problem has been explained to reader or audience, the story or play has to get straight on with the business of solving it. There is neither time nor space to turn round and talk about something else, as there is in the novel or the full-length play.

### IV

I am particularly interested in the differences between the short story and the one-act play, for several reasons.

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First, I have written a great many short stories, and have turned some of them into one-act plays. Second, I often act as a judge at performances of one-act plays. Third, I am the editor of a series of one-act plays printed by a publisher—that is, I choose, out of the scores of plays that are sent in, the few that I think good enough to print.

So that, even if I were not naturally interested in the difference between the two things, I have had my nose rubbed in it, so to speak: I have to be interested in it, whether I like it or not. Fortunately, I find it interesting, apart from these reasons.

### V

The special problem of a one-act play is that it has one scene, to which, somehow or other, the characters have to be brought. If the scene is a kitchen, then everybody in the play has got to come into that kitchen. In a short story, of course, as in a film, you can follow your chief characters wherever they like to go, and take the reader with you. But the audience of the one-act play is sitting down on chairs in the theatre, or hall, and the characters have got to be brought to them.

### VI

This is one of the chief faults I notice in the plays that are sent in to me to read. The writers have great difficulty in bringing the characters on to the stage, and getting them off again. After all, if you come to think of it, it is not enough to make someone walk on the stage when the author happens to want him, and walk off again as soon as he has said his little bit. Some reason must be given which makes it natural that that person should walk on the stage just at that moment.

He has to have a reason for going away, too. The play must make sense. You cannot have people walking all over

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the stage aimlessly, at their own sweet will, as if it were a railway station.

On a railway station, there is plenty going on. People are walking about and talking, and all that sort of thing. But if you mark off a bit of a railway station, and call it a stage, and sit down to watch it, what you see will not make sense, because it will not be clear what they are all doing, and why they are doing it.

To understand properly what was going on, you would have to know what was in the head of each of them, what their plans were, just why the old gentleman was so angry with the porter, just what it was the lady with the dog was looking for, and so on and so forth.

When you are watching a play, however, the author's first business is to let you know just what is going on, and why the characters are doing what they are doing.

## VII

This brings us to the second very common fault in writing one-act plays—a fault one finds in the short stories of inexperienced writers, too.

Obviously, if the audience is to know what is going on, some explanation of it must be given. But in the play, the only way in which an explanation can be given is by means of what the characters say. A certain amount, it is true, can be explained by means of what they do: but by far the greater part has to be explained by means of what they say.

So these inexperienced writers start their plays by making two of the characters explain at great length to each other the things which the audience needs to be told—without stopping to think whether the characters would in fact, ever say these things to each other.

I read a play the other day in which an old mother and father proceeded to tell each other all about their four children—for the audience's benefit, of course. It never

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I read a play the other day in which an old mother and father proceeded to tell each other all about their four children—for the audience's benefit, of course. It never

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seemed to have struck the writer that the mother and father would know something about their own children, and that, therefore, it would be extremely unlikely that, on the particular day when the play was supposed to begin, they should start to tell each other, at great length, what each knew perfectly well already.

### VIII

The writer's first job is to provide a natural reason why whatever information the audience needs should be given by one character to another. The simplest way to get round this difficulty is to bring a stranger on the stage, who has to be told the facts, because, being a stranger, he would not know them.

One of my own one-act plays starts with a policeman asking questions of a landlady about something which has happened before the play began. The policeman would have asked these questions anyway, and they and the answers to them tell the audience what has happened, in the first couple of minutes.

It is always possible to find a natural reason which makes it necessary, *inside the framework of the play*, for any necessary information to be given to the audience. Similarly, although in a short story the writer can give short explanations on his own account, these can often be got rid of in exactly the same way, by making the characters give the information to each other for good and natural reasons.

### IX

This is the commonest fault of all in the plays and short stories which I see. One play, which I read, went so far as to begin with the principal character talking to himself for three pages—three solid pages—so as to tell the audience what had happened before the play began, in order that they could understand what was to happen now.



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What man is so demented as to tell himself out loud three pages' worth of things which he knows perfectly well? And, if he is so demented, what audience is going to sit for six or seven minutes listening to him? And what unfortunate actor is going to be saddled with the job of holding an audience's attention for this length of time, with no one to help him?

### X

That brings us to another problem of the one-act play. The writer must remember what actors can do, and what they cannot.

If you send an actor off the stage to change his clothes, you must give him time to change them behind the scenes before you bring him back. The other day I was sent a play to read in which a lady walked off the stage on page three, and came back half-way down page four in full evening dress. Well—even supposing that the audience did not notice that this was impossible—even allowing for the fact that time on the stage is not the same as time in the real world: the moment she gets off the stage, the poor lady *is* in the real world!

And if you will tell me how she is going to get out of one set of clothes, and into another, in the space of a minute and a half—which minute and a half has to include her journey to her dressing-room and back again—I shall be very much interested to hear the answer. So will she.

### XI

No. We may take all kinds of liberties with time on the stage, as long as the audience does not notice it. In actual life, a dinner party may take an hour or an hour and a half. On the stage it probably takes only ten minutes or so. An audience will not bother about that, provided its interest is drawn to other things, and held. But we must not set

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our poor actors and actresses things to do which simply cannot be done. If the lady has to change her clothes behind the scenes, she must be allowed long enough off the stage to do the job properly and without anxiety. That is just one of the conditions of writing a play.

### XII

Another of the plays which were sent to me was only ten pages long, and consisted of no fewer than twelve changes of scene. Some of these changes were elaborate in the extreme, and one would tax all the resources of the biggest West-End theatre. It was a large school changing-room, full of baths.

I worked out some interesting figures about this play. I found that most of the scenes played for anything from half a minute to two minutes: and that the easiest change of scene would take a crew of skilled amateurs about eight minutes.

The total playing time of this play was in the neighbourhood of ten minutes, and the changes, supposing they had been at all possible, would have come to something between two and three hours. Now, if the gentleman who sent me this play had stopped to think, he would have realized that no audience would be likely to sit through such enormous waits for the sake of scenes lasting only from half a minute to two minutes. By the time he had reached his third scene, there would have been no one left in the hall.

That, of course, is an absurd example; but I assure you that, of the plays submitted to me as editor of the series I spoke about, many committed faults almost as obvious.

### XIII

What else is there to remember? Of a hundred and one things the following stand out.

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You must consider the time taken to perform the various actions which you put down.

You must not give your actors speeches which are too long. And you must not leave them about the stage with nothing to do. Any plays which you will write, to begin with at any rate, are likely to be played by amateur actors. Many of the plays I see are extremely cruel and inconsiderate to the unfortunate actors and actresses, who, if they were ever put on, would have to perform them. There are few things so difficult to do on the stage as to do nothing for any length of time. It takes a very experienced actor indeed to hang about with nothing to say, and not look a fool. If the actor manages to be forgotten, then there is no point in having him on the stage at all. If some useful purpose is served by his staying in view of the audience, he must be given something to do. True, an intelligent producer will give him a paper to read, or a pencil to sharpen, or a window to look out of, and help the playwright out. But it is the playwright's business to see to these things for himself.

## XIV

You must be able to hear in your mind what a line will sound like when it is spoken, and make dead sure, if it is meant to be serious, that it will not make the audience laugh.

(As a matter of fact, this is one of the hardest things of all. In many cases, nothing but experience will tell you whether a line will produce the effect you want.)

You must make sure, too, that the business, the actions which the characters have to perform on the stage, fit in with the dialogue, the words they have to speak.

Suppose that your scene is a dinner-table, and a butler is serving the guests with food and drink from the side-board. You will have to work out, by doing the actions yourself in your own room, that the butler has time to do

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what he has to do, and be where you want him if he has to speak, or if anybody else has to make a remark about what he is doing.

You would not believe the difficulties which this can cause in actual performance. I remember acting in a play in which, at one point, the butler had to pour champagne (it was not champagne, really) into the glass of one of the ladies, whereupon she exclaimed, "Ooh, fizz!"

All the butler's movements with food and drink had been rehearsed with a stop watch, but actual performance is very different from rehearsal. On some nights, when the audience was appreciative and laughed a lot, the actors had to wait before speaking, in order to be heard, so that the butler's movements were apt to get ahead of the dialogue. He could not walk more slowly, so as to keep pace with the dialogue, as that would have looked silly. So he had to invent things to do at the sideboard, in order to come in at the right time with his bottle of champagne.

On other nights, when the audience did not laugh, the dialogue was apt to get ahead of the butler's business, so that he had to race to catch up.

And, on one frightful occasion, when one of the actors missed a cue, and two whole pages of the dialogue got cut out by accident, the poor butler nearly had a fit, and had to miss out a whole course of the dinner, in order to be ready with his bottle—because the actress could not say, "Ooh, fizz!" until there was some fizz.

## XV

When you write a play, you are putting your characters in a framework and sticking them up in front of the audience. The first thing to ask yourself, before you begin, is whether the story you have to unfold is one that gains from being presented in this framework.

Is it actually *helped* by being made visible to an audience? Are there things in it which you can only bring

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out by putting them on the stage? Do your lines gain by being spoken? Is your action the richer for being acted?

If you had seen as many plays performed as I have, particularly plays written in verse, you would realize how necessary these questions are. I have seen many stories told on the stage which gained nothing whatever from being acted. The effect would have been just as good if they had been read aloud. They would come through the ear just as well as through the ear and eye together.

Many of the best plays, the plays that are most effective on the stage, are nothing much to read. They are nothing much to read because the words are only part of them. For their effect, they depend on the things the audience sees—the slow walk of the old man to the door, the hand of the villain stealing round the window and placing the revolver in the incriminating spot, the terrible look on the face of the mother when she realizes what is happening to her son—and so on and so forth.

On the stage we are not *telling* a story: we are *showing* it. We are giving the audience the fun of seeing what happens and how it happens.

This is one of the reasons why novelists generally write bad plays. The novelist, if he wants to, can pop in an explanation of what has happened, or skip over a few weeks in a sentence. The playwright cannot do this. A play which begins with a long explanation of all that has gone before is a bad play. The audience does not want to hear what happened last year, last week. It wants to see what is happening now, and what is going to happen as a result of it. "Here and now" is the playwright's motto.

## XVI

This, of course, brings its own difficulties with it. On the stage, we have to compress and concentrate into a short time actions and conversations which, in real life, would be spread over days, if not weeks.

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Imagine, for instance, a row between you and someone you dislike. As a rule, rows of that kind develop slowly. You and the other person annoy each other and get on each other's nerves for weeks, probably for months, until one day neither of you can bear it any longer, and there is a blaze up.

But the playwright who shows that row on the stage must make it happen quickly. He picks out all the sarcastic remarks, all the digs and back-chat from those weeks and months, and packs them into ten very exciting minutes. So, instead of a gradual row, working up bit by bit to its climax, you get a glorious father-and-mother of a row which excites every member of the audience.

### XVII

Also, of course, you have to make things happen on the day and hour when your play begins which, like the row we have been talking about, would in real life be gradual, and spread out over a long time. And—this is where the difficulty comes in—you have to make it seem quite natural that they should happen at this hour and on this day. Once the audience is allowed to reflect that it is odd that so much is happening all at once on this particular day, and to wonder at the coincidence, the play's grip is lost. The audience must believe what is going on, and so it must be made to appear natural. It must seem real.

### XVIII

That brings us to our last point. The play must *seem* real. Reality on the stage is something quite different from reality in ordinary life. Acting is not the same as behaving naturally in ordinary life. A good actor or actress is a person who, from a distance of twenty-five or fifty or a hundred feet from the audience, can *look* as if he or she were behaving naturally. That is the main

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problem of acting—to give an appearance of real life at a distance.

You can see this in a moment, if you think of an example. When you are two or three feet away from a person, you can convey your meaning by the tiniest of winks. But if you are on a platform a long way from an audience, your wink has to be magnified many times in order to produce the same effect. An actor has to use his voice, his face, his hands, he has to move and behave in such a way that what he is doing looks real from a distance.

Ordinary-life-reality does not look real on the stage. In the footlights, an ordinary, untouched complexion looks unnaturally pale. And, after all, rooms in real life do not have only three walls. They have four. The play, the people, the acting, the words, are all being presented in a form which, in the ordinary world, would not be real. They are being presented from the ground, at a certain distance from the people who are looking on. The whole thing is being put in a box, as it were. And the story has to be put into a box too.

## XIX

That is what the playwright must remember all the time. If he has in front of him a little model of the stage, if he remembers that all his people have to be brought on to that stage and make his story look real upon it, that his actors will be human beings, and must, therefore, not be set any task that human beings cannot perform: then he will be on the way to doing a good, workmanlike job.

## CHAPTER XIX

### WRITING AN ESSAY

WHEN I was a schoolmaster, taking a class in English, one of my chief difficulties was to start them writing decent essays. I say to start them, because, once they did get going, the only difficulty was to stop them. But it was hard to get them started.

Three stages were needed. One, to get them to have confidence enough to be themselves and say what they really believed, not what they thought I or someone else would like them to believe.

Two, to persuade them to try and put themselves and their beliefs on paper.

Three, to get the resulting torrents and heaps of words into some sort of order, and make an essay of them.

## II

It may seem that the first of these stages should not have been necessary at all. Why should people hesitate to be themselves in class? Why should they be shy of saying what they think? Why indeed?

But, as I have said already, when I was first put in charge of the top English class, more than twenty years ago, the boys learned less by using their wits than by obeying, by swallowing with docility what they were told. It was an excellent teaching of its kind, wonderful teaching, and I learned a lot from it: but it was desperately wrong for the teaching of English, and the producing of essays.

In an essay you need to be yourself, to say what you feel and think and believe about the subject, whatever it



## WRITING AN ESSAY

is, that has been set you. That cannot be done by being obedient and repeating what one has been told. The better little boys my little boys were, the worse they were at essays.

Had they not written any essays before? They had. What were called essays, that is. It will hardly be believed, but the essays they wrote were all built to a formula, a pattern. They learned by heart certain ways of beginning, with a wise-sounding remark. They learned ways of ending, with another. This, plus a list of likely subjects and suitable thoughts about them, made their training in the art of writing essays. They wrote two or three of these so-called essays only, in the year before their scholarship examinations. Every blessed essay they showed up must have been exactly like the next one: but it was immaterial. Their Latin and Greek were so good that it did not matter what nonsense they served up as an essay.

### III

Then, one year, a terrible thing happened. A boy actually had his English paper counted against him. The examiners had looked at it, and marked him lower than his classics entitled him to be marked. They also notified the school that henceforward the English paper was going to count.

In face of this outrage, the school authorities in their indignation turned the class over to me. And my difficulty was at once this—to persuade boys who had been spoon-fed, and brought up docile and obedient, to think for themselves, to assert themselves, to *be* themselves, and not just gramophone records. Excellent gramophone records, brilliant gramophone records, but gramophone records.

## IV

It was a job. I had some brilliant boys in those early days, and, once they started on their own, they did great work. It was the start that was so difficult. And, of course, I came in for a lot of opposition from the older masters. One of the results of this encouragement to be themselves and say what they thought was a private magazine, in which the personal habits and tricks of the masters were most accurately observed and set down—mine no less than the others’.

This, of course, was blamed on me and my subversive teaching. But my hours in class *had* to run counter to the rest of the teaching. I *had* to make them see that they were entitled to their own views on life.

## V

Nowadays, thank goodness, this is hardly ever necessary. Quite small children are encouraged to think for themselves, and to say what they think. The only question now is to get what they think into shape, and make an essay of it.

For a series of statements and opinions does not make an essay. We must have sense, order, development—progress from point to point, from beginning to end.

It does not matter what shape your essay has, but it must have *some* shape. You must arrange your ideas. Just as you cannot make a flower-bed by scattering seeds all anyhow, you cannot make an essay by pouring out on paper everything that comes into your head. An essay is an artistic job of work.

Do not, please, be put off by the word artistic. It applies to every job in which you make something with care and skill, whether in carpentering, cooking, building up a break at billiards, making a model of something, arranging

## WRITING AN ESSAY

flowers, or putting a room to rights. An essay should be a decent job of work, with plenty of life in it, and properly finished off.

### VI

What is the best way to begin? How does a professional writer set to work, when he has to write an essay, or an article?

There are several ways: but all admit the need to get their ideas into some sort of order. I can at any rate tell you what I do myself. I think the thing over, and then get down on paper the first ideas that come to me.

Presently I have, say, half a dozen sentences, or even short paragraphs. They are not in the right order: number four obviously ought to go in before number two, so I put a balloon round it with my pencil and show where it ought to be.

Number five is too short, not clear. I cross it out, and write a new version. Number six—I am not so sure about number six. Is it true, after all? A bit of head scratching, a bite or two on the pencil, and out comes number six.

All right. I have got the body of my essay. So far so good. Now for the right beginning. Am I going bang into the subject in the first sentence, in the way the great Bacon used to do? Or am I going to lead up to it with a short general paragraph?

Shall I, in other words, begin with a few general remarks, and narrow down gradually to my subject: or shall I start right away with a particular remark, dead on the point?

### VII

One cannot make a rule about that sort of thing. It will depend entirely on the subject, and the way we are going to handle it. Sometimes one way will be better, sometimes the other.

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It depends, too, on how we are feeling on that particular morning or afternoon. For an essay is a *personal* thing. It is the direct expression of *ourselves*. It is the one form of writing in which we are fully entitled to our moods and feelings.

That excellent essayist, Mr. Robert Lynd, is always entertaining to read because he always says what is in his mind at the moment, and always manages to do it gracefully and amusingly. He saunters through his essays, talking charmingly over his shoulder, and getting in some sharp digs every now and then without appearing to, without exerting himself. Taking the personal quality of the essay as his basis, he makes it the whole strength of his work. His essays are so easily written that they seem careless—till you look into them.

## VIII

Here I am going, quite deliberately, to repeat something I said earlier on. Two or three times, while I was giving these talks, teachers wrote to say that it is a waste of time to put before young listeners what they were pleased to call the fine points of professional writing. They said the listeners were not up to it, would get no good from it, would not know what I was talking about.

Believe me, these teachers were absolutely and totally and ridiculously wrong. I have been a schoolboy, I have been a teacher, I am a writer—and I *know* they are wrong.

The only difference between me, aged ten or twelve or fourteen or whatever it was, and sitting down to write an essay in school, and me aged thirty-four or forty-four or whatever it is, and sitting down to write an essay or an article to-day, is that to-day I am older, and work faster, and have had more practice. *That is all*. I liked trying to write essays then, I like trying to write them now. Don't you believe it when people tell you that writing is a sort of mystery, and that you cannot possibly know anything

## WRITING AN ESSAY

about it. I know some of you find it hard to put a sentence down on paper. I know that some of you cannot spell and cannot punctuate.

But you and the professional writer, when you sit down to work, are both sitting down to do the same job. He does it better and faster than you do—as indeed he ought. He has been at it for years. But it is the same job. It is done in the same way.

No one tells you that you cannot understand professional football because you may not be able to run as fast or dribble as well as a professional footballer. No one tells you you cannot understand county cricket because you are not as good as a county player.

It is just the same with writing. You can understand it—if *you want to*. If you are interested. You will not understand everything to start with. You will miss a good many of the finer points. But you can understand the broad, main lines of the thing: and that is all I have ever talked about here.

## IX

It is therefore relevant and proper for me to mention a professional essayist such as Mr. Robert Lynd. I mention him, not only because I admire him, but because his essays appear in books which have been published specially for use in schools: so that they are easy to find. Look at them, if you get a chance. They will tell you far more about how to write a good essay than a score of chapters. I do not, of course, suggest that you ought to copy them. You must not copy anybody. Your essay must be you, and nobody else.

But, when you see from them how easily and naturally Mr. Lynd can be himself on paper, it will encourage you to go ahead and be yourself.

## X

An essay by you ought to be what you think and feel and believe about whatever the subject is: not all poured out higgledy-piggledy, like toy bricks out of a box, but arranged so as to make a pleasant shape, to make sense, to lead from an interesting beginning (a good first sentence is worth a lot) to an end which *is* an end, not just the place where the essay happens to stop.

Some people like you to make up your mind in the last sentence or two, to say what side you take. That is all right, where the question of taking sides arises: but you cannot always do it. In an essay on "Snails" you are not called upon to end up by saying whether you like them or not. In any case, it is too much like a rule: and we do not want rules.

An essay is a go-as-you-please, so arranged as to please other people: to be interesting. If you can hold the reader's attention all the way, and make him think at the end, "I'd like to meet the person who wrote that," you have done well. If you can make him think, "I'd like to give that person a smack in the eye," you have done well, too. Your essay has been alive. It has been real. It has been personal. The odds are, he would have wanted to give you a smack in the eye anyway.

## XI

Your essay must be you. It may be cheerful, fanciful, funny, grave, argumentative, whatever you will. But it must be sincere. It must be you. That is what the reader wants. *And*—supposing you are still at school—that is what pays in exams. Examiners are only readers. They are human. They like to be interested. And they *far* prefer a vigorous essay with views they dislike—views they want to smack in the eye—to a dull, colourless one.

So never be afraid to be yourself. It is the only way.

## CHAPTER XX

### DO YOU LIKE POETRY?

DO you like poetry?

This is a very personal question, and one which I have no right whatever to expect you to answer. It is just as well that this is not a direct interview, so that you cannot answer, anyhow. Here is a question which, like every question that has to do with writing or reading, must have an absolutely honest answer. And I do not think it is fair to go up to someone, especially someone whom you do not know very well, and ask, point blank, a personal question of this kind: a question which must be answered honestly, out of one's private feelings.

So, instead of my putting this question to you personally, let us, instead, discuss some of the difficulties people find with poetry; some of the reasons that make them dislike it, or think that they dislike it, and see if we can clear our minds about the whole subject of poetry.

## II

There is no point in denying that a great many people will tell you that they dislike poetry, or can see nothing in it. Of these there will be a number who really dislike poetry.

The rest do not dislike it. They dislike the idea of it, or something which has got muddled up with it in their minds. They think it is poetry which they dislike, when all the time it is some idea about poetry, some quite accidental idea, which has nothing to do with poetry at all.

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In the same way, a certain number of the people who will tell you that they *do* like poetry are really liking some idea which they have muddled up with poetry. Or, perhaps, they think they like it because they suppose it is more intelligent, more clever, superior, to like it. They think that educated people like poetry, and that, therefore, they must like it, too.

But in a discussion of this kind, when we are not obliged to say aloud what we are thinking, we can afford to be perfectly honest and examine the question in our own minds. Let us take, first of all, some of the objections to poetry, or, rather, the objections about poetry: because, as I think I shall be able to show, these are hardly ever objections to poetry itself, but to ideas that have got tangled up with it.

### III

The first and commonest objection is that there is something unmanly about poetry. A good many of the people who feel this do not say so out loud, but they feel it strongly, deep inside them. Perhaps they feel it about music and painting, too. At any rate, they feel it about poetry.

There are a great many answers to that objection, but we will give them the one which is most likely to appeal to them. If poetry is unmanly, how is it that so many great Englishmen, so many great soldiers, so many men of the kind who give the word "manly" its meaning, have not only loved it, but written it? Was Sir Philip Sidney unmanly? Sir Philip Sidney, who, wounded to the death at the battle of Zutphen, gave the drink of water which he had begged for to a wounded soldier by his side? Yet Sir Philip Sidney not only wrote about poetry, but wrote it.

Was Sir Walter Raleigh unmanly? Sir Walter Raleigh, the great explorer and fighter, who is one of the chief heroes of Queen Elizabeth's reign? Yet Sir Walter Raleigh



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not only wrote poetry, but chose it to write his last message on the night before he died.

General Wolfe quoted a poem before the battle of Quebec, and said he would rather have written those lines than take Quebec. The soldier poets of the last war did not fight any the worse, and their comrades did not find them any less manly or less brave, because they loved and wrote poetry. I could give you the names of a dozen of them—and I know some of them personally. They are men all right.

## IV

If men like this can find pleasure in poetry, in reading it and writing it, there surely cannot be anything unmanly about poetry in itself.

If there is not, how did the idea start that there was?

There were, in the last century, two or three poets whose lives, and whose ways of behaviour in public, did not at all fit in with the ideas of most men at the time. Some of these poets wore long hair, and did undoubtedly behave badly. Others wore long hair, and did undoubtedly behave oddly. Englishmen have devoted so much of their time to sport and outdoor activities that they have been apt to miss the arts, and, as a natural result, those who did not miss the arts, who enjoyed poetry and painting and music, were often apt to put on airs about it, and behave as if they were a superior sort of being.

In the last century, too, there were a great many women who had not enough to do, and who turned eagerly to the arts, to painting and music and books, in order to occupy their time. These ladies made a natural audience for the poets, who thereby got the reputation of being fit only to talk to women in drawing-rooms and parlours.

If we put these things together, we can see clearly enough how the idea may have arisen that poetry was queer and effeminate, something which was all very well

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for women to amuse themselves with when they had nothing better to do, but which was no study for a real man. And, at the same time, we can see perfectly well that this objection was not an objection to poetry itself, but an objection to these erroneous ideas which had gathered about poetry and become associated with it in people's minds.

### V

We have, none of us, any *duty* to like poetry. There is no obligation on us to like it, any more than there is an obligation on us to read good books. We can perfectly well go through our lives without ever looking at a poem. But we shall miss something real if we do.

The man or woman who is completely ignorant of poetry misses one of the greatest sources of strength and happiness to be found in the world. It is like having no ear for music. You cannot blame a person for having no ear for music. You can only sympathize with him or her, and be sorry, because he or she is missing such a source of pleasure and happiness. It is the same with poetry.

### VI

May I once more repeat something I have said earlier on?

More than one reader will object at this point.

"But," he will say, "I know several really big men, really fine people whom I admire, soldiers, sailors airmen, and so on, who cannot bear poetry, or at any rate, who get nothing out of it."

. I know plenty, too. But that is not an argument against poetry. Let us look at it in another way. Let us imagine that one of these brave men—suppose he is a V.C.—let us imagine that one of these brave men, instead of not being able to like poetry, has only got one eye. He is the best man in the world, he is marvellous company, he can tell

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you thrilling stories from morning till night, he is everything one admires and looks up to. Yet all his good qualities added together do not amount to one single argument for having only one eye. He would be just as brave, just as good company, he would tell just as many marvellous stories, and so on, and so forth, if he had two eyes.

Once again—it is not a virtue to lack a thing. If I can enjoy cricket and dancing and a country walk, and you can enjoy cricket and dancing and a country walk *and* poetry, you are one up on me, because you have one more chance of enjoyment than I have. If, on the other hand, you can enjoy painting and poetry and music, and I can enjoy painting and poetry and music *and* football, then I am one up on you, because *I* have an extra source of enjoyment which you have not.

## VII

It comes simply to this. People who cannot enjoy poetry are missing something, and missing something which men who have no superiors in manliness have time and again declared to be one of the best things life has to offer.

“I think,” said Sir Philip Sidney, “and I think I think rightly—the laurel crown appointed to triumphant captains, doth worthily, of all other learnings, honour the poet’s triumph.”

## VIII

Next point. Is there anything in the nature of poetry itself which people dislike?

This obviously is more difficult to answer. If there is, it certainly is not the rhythm, and it certainly is not the rhyme. It is not the rhythm, because, from a very early age, children love jingles and rhythms which you can beat out easily with your hand. The very name, nursery rhymes, tells us that. They do not grow out of this taste,

either, as you can see any time soldiers go by roaring out words to the rhythm of a tune.

And if you think it is only the tune they're enjoying, what about limericks—those short verses, with their fixed rhythm and rhyme, which are such a favourite form of telling funny stories? The whole point of a limerick is in its rhythm and its rhyme.

There was a young girl from the Tavy  
Who went out to work as a slavey;  
While serving the meat  
She tripped up her feet,  
And went head over heels with the gravy.

That sounds quite pleasant as a limerick, but, if I told it to you in plain prose, it would have no point at all.

Here is another, a silly little jingling couplet:

In loving memory of Margaret Burney,  
Who fell off a tram and broke her journey.

What point there is in that disappears at once if we take away the rhyme. For instance:

In loving memory of Margaret Higgins,  
Who fell off a tram and broke her journey.

No point whatever. What point there is, is in the rhyme.

## IX

There is nothing, then, in rhyme or rhythm which makes people dislike poetry. Is there anything else?

I think there is—particularly when one is still at school. Some people dislike poetry, not because they do not feel it, but because they do. They feel it deeply, and so they hate above all things having to talk about it in class, or worst of all, having to stand up and read it out, or say it. To say aloud a poem which one feels deeply inside can very

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often be a real invasion of one's privacy: like having to confess aloud something private about one's feelings for another person.

I have known several people who were put off poetry in this way. But, here again, it was not poetry which they hated. It was something that had got muddled up with the poetry, that is, having to stand up, and run the risk of showing their feelings in public.

That is the heart of the trouble. It is my belief, after a good many years' experience, that nine out of ten people who say they dislike poetry do not really dislike poetry, but something which, by accident, has got mixed up with poetry in their thoughts.

## CHAPTER XXI

### HOW WE SPEAK

FOR some years now it has seemed to me a great weakness of most of the English teaching in our schools that it pays more attention to written English than to spoken English.

I know, of course, that many schools do pay great attention to spoken English: but many more do not, particularly the kind of schools with which I am most familiar. It is still possible to distinguish oneself in English, to get an honours degree at a university in English, and speak like nothing on earth. Indeed, among educated people you will hear some of the most frightful voices to be heard anywhere: thin voices, pinched voices, voices without colour or meaning, voices which make everything they say sound boring or silly or insincere.

It is no good to say that people cannot help their voices. They can help their voices, provided something is done about those voices from the very beginning: provided that someone in school gets down to the business and sees that any slovenly or wrong tricks of speech are dealt with.

## II

I want one thing to be absolutely clear. When I talk of good, clear speaking, I do not mean any sort of criticism of anybody's accent as such. I do not mean anything against a Yorkshire accent or a Devonshire accent or a Lancashire accent or a Cockney accent or any other sort of accent.

By speaking clearly I do not mean speaking like a B.B.C. announcer, or like an Oxford don (Oxford dons as often as

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not speak very badly). I mean using your own natural voice in a natural way so that it tells people what sort of person you are: using it sincerely, without tricks, without affectations, and without any tightness of the throat or other hindrance which can be got rid of.

There are, of course, a number of physical hindrances to clear speaking, but most of these can be got rid of. If you have adenoids, for instance, and sou'd all the tibe as if you had a bad cold id your head, and cad't sou'd your n's and m's, then naturally you cannot speak clearly until the obstruction has been removed. If you have a few front teeth missing, you cannot thepeak clearly becauthe you lithp. If you lisp anyhow, or cannot sound your r's, but say weally and wabbit, you can be cured in very few lessons by any competent teacher of speaking.

The point is that nearly all of us get into habits which ought to be cured, and can be cured, if they are not left till too late.

## III

I do not mean cure our *accents*. I should not want to cure them, in any case, though it is important to be able to speak what is sometimes called standard English if we want to.

I would be the last person to claim that standard English is perfect, and that a Yorkshire or a Swansea or a Devon or an Aberdeen accent is bad. I could hardly take up that position, even if I were such a fool as to want to, because I do not speak standard English myself. My own speaking is a mongrel affair, part Irish, part West Country, part Oxford—and it used to be much worse till the B.B.C. made a record or two and let me hear for myself what it sounded like. But it is recognizable English, and people can understand what I am saying.

And that is the point I am getting at, the practical, bread-and-butter point, which will appeal to everyone,

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whether they live in Halifax or Glasgow, in Tunbridge Wells or in Seven Dials. If people could not understand me, if I had an accent that was difficult to follow, or a trick of speech that made me hard to understand, then I should not ever have been allowed to broadcast. The voice test which everyone is given before he or she is allowed on the air would have weeded me out.

### IV

When I went to school, we used to be taken once a week in English by the headmaster. I had lived in Devon, and spoke with a West Country accent. Another boy came from Oxfordshire, and spoke with an accent the like of which I have never heard before or since. The headmaster used to make me repeat one sentence, which he made up especially to catch me out, and he made the other boy repeat another. My sentence was this—I'm not sure that I can say it right to-day. I had to say, "The third bird never heard a word." I used to say at first, "The third burd never hurd a wurd."

My friend from Oxfordshire had to say, "Oh my, what a bright fly," which he at first rendered as "Oh moi, what a brouight floi."

After a term of this we were both able to say our sentences more or less straight.

### V

But I am not talking about accents. I am talking about being able to say clearly and cleanly what we want to say: and that is hardly ever a matter of accent.

There *are* one or two accents which are bad in themselves, because they are founded on wrong speech habits, wrong ways of using one's voice.

For example, there is a certain kind of Dublin accent which is nothing more or less than a snuffle. It sounds as



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if the speaker needed very urgently to blow his nose, and it takes all the tone and colour out of the voice, and makes it sound dead. This is a bad accent because it is completely dead, and its badness and its deadness are based on a physical fact. There used to be in Dublin a great deal of nose and throat trouble, probably due to conditions in some of the poorer houses of the city. In one or two other big cities, you will hear bad accents caused by similar bad conditions.

### VI

Apart from this kind of thing, accents in themselves do not make for bad speaking. For that you have to have carelessness, bad habits, or some cause in the mind, such as continual fear, excessive shyness, and so on.

A tight buttoned-up sort of person, the sort of person who is always on the defensive and expecting someone to do something unpleasant to him or her, will generally have a tight buttoned-up sort of voice. A loud bullying sort of person will often have a loud coarse voice, a voice that is unpleasant to listen to. The only way to cure those voices is to cure the characters which they express.

But, normal, ordinary, decent people are all the better for having voices which express their ordinary, normal, decent qualities: and it ought to be a part of English teaching everywhere to see that they have such voices. We ought all to be able to make a natural use of the voice we have been born with—for our own sake, if not for other people's.

### VII

Suppose you have to say anything in public. Think of the number of people who have been put off good things by hearing them foolishly and incompetently spoken. I can remember clergymen who made the finest things in the Bible sound silly by the way they spoke them. There was one in particular whom I used to copy when I was a boy:

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and it took me years and years to be able to hear certain passages in any other way than the way he said them.

There was no need on earth for him to talk as he did. Anyone who understood speaking could have shown him how not to do it—how not to tighten his throat and stick his lower jaw out and get his tongue in the wrong place.

And there was another person I knew at Oxford—and several dons—who all spoke with the same sort of high tight voice as if someone had tied their necks up in corrugated iron. They were all educated men, men who held positions in which they ought to have been an example.

They may have been examples in some ways, but they certainly were not examples of how to speak. While all sorts of people had taught them their language, English, no one had attempted to teach them how to speak it.

The great Australian singer, Madame Melba, said many times that it was easier to sing well than to sing badly. What she meant was that bad singing is the result of bad habits and tricks, and that good singing comes from the natural, unhindered flow of the voice.

## VIII

I speak with great feeling about this business of learning to use one's voice naturally. When I began broadcasting, the B.B.C., as I said, made a record of my voice reading a talk. Never shall I forget the shock of it. Was that objectionable, affected, thin noise—that hollow, nasal, high thing, with a false Oxford accent overlaying bits of Dublin and Devon—was that really mine? Was *that* how I sounded?

It gave me a lot to think about. I was very grateful, and, when the next record was made, it was not quite so bad. By degrees I found out a few things: and the most encouraging, the most helpful of them was, that my voice sounded so unconvincing because of feelings in myself. I was terribly nervous: I was unsure of myself: I did not

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know if I could do the things I set out to do: I was too anxious about how my work would be received. And all the uncertainty, all the anxiety, all the desire to please, came out in my voice and messed it up.

Why was that encouraging? It meant that, once I could get rid of those things in myself, and let my voice relax, my speaking would improve. From that time on I took speaking seriously. I do not mean that I fussed about it, but I tried to let my voice say simply what I wanted it to say: not to be a hindrance, not to come between me and the person to whom I was speaking.

I have a very long way to go to get it right, if ever I do: I know that. But I work at it, and learn all I can by judging at competitions and festivals and places where one hears good speaking and bad.

## IX

But think what a lot of trouble I should have been saved, if there had been someone to see that I did not get into bad or sloppy habits of speaking. I was taught to use English on paper, for people's eyes, but not for their ears. What a joy it is to hear a really good voice, well used, and how it influences one in its owner's favour. Our voice and the way we use it is the quickest way we have of introducing ourselves to other people and giving them an idea of what sort of person we are.

And, to give a good impression, a sincere impression, we need no tricks or refinements, no la-de-da nonsense. We need only to use our voice honestly and clearly.

## X

May I come back now to the practical bread-and-butter aspect of the way we speak, and suggest two points?

- (1) If you have an accent which people cannot understand outside your own town or county, you are

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I have a very long way to go to get it right, if ever I do: I know that. But I work at it, and learn a'l I can by judging at competitions and festivals and places where one hears good speaking and bad.

## IX

But think what a lot of trouble I should have been saved, if there had been someone to see that I did not get into bad or sloppy habits of speaking. I was taught to use English on paper, for people's eyes, but not for their ears. What a joy it is to hear a really good voice, well used, and how it influences one in its owner's favour. Our voice and the way we use it is the quickest way we have of introducing ourselves to other people and giving them an idea of what sort of person we are.

And, to give a good impression, a sincere impression, we need no tricks or refinements, no la-de-da nonsense. We need only to use our voice honestly and clearly.

## X

May I come back now to the practical bread-and-butter aspect of the way we speak, and suggest two points?

- (1) If you have an accent which people cannot understand outside your own town or county, you are

## ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

going to be handicapped if you ever have to look for a job outside your own town or county.

- (2) If you have a trick of speech which is bad in itself: that is, one which comes from some physical defect, or from sheer laziness, you will be handicapped even at home.

Never mind about the handicaps to self-expression, which we have just discussed. Let us concentrate on the bread-and-butter handicaps, which impress everyone, whether he believes in the world of values or not.

If you have an accent which makes you hard to understand, if you have a lazy trick of speech which makes you hard to understand, you may suffer in your pocket. Employers in each case may hesitate to employ you, either because they will be afraid that their customers will not know what you say, or because they will think that, if you are careless or slovenly in one thing, i.e., in the way you speak, you will be careless and slovenly in your work.

## XI

Once again, I am not saying anything against local accents as such. I keep on about that point, but I know from experience how touchy people are about it. I have a cousin who speaks the Southern kind of English. She went to a university in Yorkshire, where she met with real anger and hostility, and was made to feel an outsider, because she said "mother" instead of "moother," and "cake" instead of "caäke."

Mind you, it was not she who objected to their accent. It was they who objected to hers. Now what on earth does it matter whether we speak London or West Riding, so long as each of us understands what the other is saying? So long as the speech is clear, and vigorous, and healthy?

XII

Let us take lazy speaking first. I was given a beautiful example of that by someone in the B.B.C. She had actually heard it said, and she passed it on to me as a sample.

Here is the sentence. "Twe'y se'm secketries 'r' wor'in' in lib'ry."

Have you got it? "Twe'y se'm secketries 'r' wor'in in lib'ry."

That means, in ordinary English, "Twenty-seven secretaries are working in the library." Said by a lazy girl who could not be bothered to sound half her consonants, and who left out anything which meant she would have to move her lips, it became "Twe'y se'm secketries 'r' wor'in in lib'ry." Few employers would take on anyone who was so lazy she would not even take the trouble to sound her consonants. To say the least, it is not an encouraging beginning.

XIII

Next comes the genuinely difficult accent. Here a question looms up in many minds: so let us have it.

"Look here," says the objector. "We speak an accent which you folk in the south may find hard to understand. Well—that's not our fault. Why should we change it? Why shouldn't you change your ears, and have some sense, and learn to understand us? Why do we have to do all the work?"

It's a fair question; and there are two answers to it. The first is this. If you come to a man in a different part of the country, and want a job from him, he has the right to decide whether you are going to suit him or not. He may not like the way you speak, he may not like the shape of your nose: but you are asking him for something, and you have no right to complain if he does not want you.

And if you speak in a way that he cannot understand,

## ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

that he thinks his customer will not be able to understand, you cannot blame him if he decides against you.

The question is, Must he and all his customers put themselves out to learn to understand you? Or must you put yourself out to learn how to speak so that they can understand you?

Whatever answer *you* decide on, there is no doubt how he will decide. He will decide that, since you want the job, you must be the one to put yourself out, and learn to speak, if not his way and his customers' way, at least so that he and they can understand you.

Why did my headmaster every week pick on us two boys, and embarrass us, and make us stand up in front of the whole class and say over silly sentences? To poke fun at us? To be cruel? Not a bit of it. He knew that, if we only knew how to speak like that, it would be a handicap to us in later life. He wanted us to be able to talk in the ordinary way *as well as* our own. AS WELL AS our own.

## XIV

You see now what I am getting at. I would be the last man on earth to ask you to lose your native accent, to forsake the way you speak. A man who is ashamed of the way he learned to speak is as bad as a man who is ashamed of his home and his parents. Stick to it and be proud of it. *But learn the other way too, for business purposes, for bread-and-butter purposes.*

You will often hear fine-looking girls in big London shops talking to customers in marvellous English—too good to be true, sometimes.

"Yes, Modom. Certainly, Modom. Will Modom please step this way."

And then, when they think no one is looking, "I s'y, Gert. Chuck us over a chocklit, will yer?"

If that was the only way they could talk, they would not be saying, "Step this way" to Modom. They would

## HOW WE SPEAK

never have got the job. If they said, "Step this w'y, pluyse," Modom would not step that way. She would step into another shop. Very silly of her, and all that. But she is the customer, and the customer is always right.

### XV

Look for a moment at three sad cases: the cases of Bill Butterfield, of Emily Patterson, and of Mona McCann.

Bill Butterfield came from the capital of the British Empire. He was an excellent chap, tall for his age, well built, and quite good-looking. He was quick-witted, and had done very well at school. But he talked with what the students of speaking call a glottal stop. For instance, when his little brother got a fishbone in his mouth, and complained to Bill, Bill told him to spi' i' aa' i' the bu'ih. Can you do that one? Spi' i' aa' i' the bu'ih. In more usual English, Spit it out in the bucket.

Some of you may have heard Jack Warner, in one of the Garrison Theatre shows, sing a song of which the chorus was "'E didn ou' oo' a' eh i' "—He didn't ought to have ate it—or, more politely, He ought not to have eaten it. 'E didn ou' oo' a' eh i'. It is difficult to say—much more difficult than the more usual way. So is Bill's "Spi' i' aa' i' the bu'ih." It is far easier to say "Spit it out in the bucket."

Why Bill talks like that we need not go into now. But he does. Or he did. He is learning how to talk the other way now. When he went up for a job, his prospective employer looked him up and down, liked the look of him, and asked him his name.

"Bill Bu'afiel', sir."

"*What?*"

"Bill Bu'afiel'."

And that was as far as the interview went. Bill did not get the job. It was a great pity. He could have done it on his head.

The same thing happened to Emily Patterson. Emily



lived in a big town north of the border. A large drapery stores wanted girls to serve at the counters. Emily was a smart-looking girl. They asked her her name.

"Eymily Pa'erson."

Exit poor Emily. Such a shame. She would have been splendid at the job. But the girl after her could speak straight, and was taken on.

It was just the same with Mona McCann. Mona came from Dublin. Her family had to come over to England, and Mona had to look for a job. She was a really pretty girl, and she wanted to be a nurse. But she spoke with the Dublin snuffle. She called herself Boda Bacad, and the matron of the hospital decided that she either had adenoids or was half-witted. So—no job for Mona.

## XVI

I should suggest, then, to Mona and Emily and Bill, that they should learn to speak the usual form of English, the understandable sort, by imitation, just as I learn to speak their way. It is no harder for them than it is for me. Then they can switch it on when it is wanted, just as I can switch their way on when I want it. The same applies to Tom Cobleigh, who lives at Devonport, and Sam Buckingham, who comes from Oxfordshire. Let them all keep their own way of speaking, but let them learn the other, to use when they need it.

I have had many good jobs of work because I can speak broad Devon and broad Dublin and one or two other accents. Bill and Emily and Mona and Co. may not have to do that: but they can at least see to it that they do not lose a good job for want of being able to speak ordinary straight English. They need not stand in their own way, either through obstinacy, or laziness, or for any reason which is in their control.

How we speak *is* in our control. So let us not be like Bill and Emily and Mona, and miss good jobs we could easily have had if we had taken a little trouble.

## POSTSCRIPT

I HAVE tried to suggest in these chapters

- (1) That English is not just a subject, but the expression of our whole life as English-speaking people.
- (2) That English is one and indivisible, from the classroom to the highest flights of imaginative literature.
- (3) That English is not a dead and dull matter of obedience to rules, but is live, and creative, and practical.
- (4) That English is capable of giving us the greatest pleasure.
- (5) That this pleasure is to be had from good books and poems and plays and films and from good speaking.

If I have made you think seriously about all or any of these points, then I am well contented.



## QUESTIONS

THE following questions are added in deference to the requests of many correspondents—some of them teachers. I was, personally, reluctant to add anything which might make it appear that my aim was to teach, in the usually accepted sense of the word. It is rather to talk about things which interest me, in the hope that my interest may be shared by others. If any reader has been interested, and has been encouraged to go on thinking after putting down the book, the book has done all I could hope.

The questions, then, are meant as a further encouragement to such thinking—whether in the classroom or outside.

### CHAPTER I. ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

- (1) Do you think I have exaggerated the importance of English? If you do, why?

*Or*

If you do not, can you give any further reasons why it is so important?

- (2) Make a list of six words the sound of which gives you pleasure. Do you like them for the sound alone? Or because they stand for things you like? Or for a mixture of the two? Give any reasons you can.

### CHAPTER II. READING FOR PLEASURE

- (1) "I know what I like, and I'm going to stick to it." How far is this a good statement of policy for one's private reading?
- (2) "Reading for pleasure." What do you, personally, mean by pleasure? Is it the same as amusement? Would you make a difference between the pleasures you enjoy alone and those you enjoy in company with other people? If so, what difference?
- (3) In this chapter I have said nothing about reading aloud.

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Ought I to have done so? Can you think of any reason why I did not? Or do you think I just forgot?

### CHAPTER III. THE TWO WORLDS

- (1) If someone denied altogether that there was a world of values, how would you answer him?

*Or*

If you do not believe there is a world of values, how do you get rid of what is said in this chapter?

- (2) Give any other illustrations you can think of (like my illustration of the doll), from your own experience, which show that value is not the same as price.
- (3) When a man dies for what he believes, which world governs him? Or can *both*?

### CHAPTER IV. WHAT USE ARE BOOKS?

- (1) Of the books which you have read, which four would you wish to keep, supposing the rest were all to be destroyed? Why would you choose those four?
- (2) "All novels are just made-up stories, and none of them true, so it wouldn't matter if they were all destroyed." A boy said that to me once. Do you agree with him? If not, where do you think he was wrong?

### CHAPTER V. WRITING FOR PLEASURE

- (1) "All things can tempt me from this craft of verse," wrote the poet W. B. Yeats. Many famous writers have complained that they hate the labour of writing. Nobody forces them to write. Yet they do write. Can you think of any reasons for this?
- (2) A critic once said that it was harder to write a good short story than a good novel. Arnold Bennett told him he was wrong. Can you guess why?

### CHAPTER VI. PUNCTUATION

- (1) If you study the work of different writers, you will find that each has his own tricks of punctuation. Does anything in this chapter suggest to you why this is?

## QUESTIONS

- (2) Can you rearrange and punctuate the following passages so as to make sense, and to conform to the customs of printing?
- (a) No but you must be more careful Tim doesnt know one note from another he sat there looking high-souled suffering agonies of boredom and pretending to enjoy it just because you were there and now youve told him in the most brutal manner that hes been making a fool of himself Ellis how frightful what can I do go and be nice to him.
- (b) John stood up and stretched himself what about a bathe he suggested after all that tea youll sink like a stone you and your old wives tales whos going in with me not me too full too lazy you mean I would Gerry said only Ive nothing to wear. (N.B.—There are three people talking here.)

## CHAPTER VII. GRAMMAR

- (1) "Grammar is the rules of the game of language." What do you think of this way of putting it?
- (2) The following are ungrammatical. Put them right.
- (a) Between you and I, I don't think he did it.
- (b) Neither Bill nor Sam like vanilla ices.
- (c) Do it like May does, Susan!
- (d) Look at all them buckets! None of them are big enough.
- (e) I won't go without you come too.
- (f) Don't act foolish, father.
- (3) "What does it matter anyhow? Everyone can understand those sentences in Question (2). Why should you bother to change them? I think it's all so much swank, talking about grammar."
- Is there an answer to this criticism? If so, what?
- After you have decided, see a note on page 178.

## CHAPTER VIII. TOO MANY WORDS

- (1) Find, in a newspaper or magazine, a sentence which you think you can shorten without losing its meaning. (You will find plenty.) Re-write it the shorter form.

## ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

- (2) Supposing you cannot find one, have a go at these. Don't hesitate to change the wording. Put the meaning of each as shortly as you can.
- (a) The chamberlain informed the assembled guests that their further presence was unnecessary.
  - (b) We have been given to understand that from the estate of the deceased gentleman, Mr. John Kelly, an inconsiderable sum remains for the support and sustenance of his unhappy widow.
  - (c) Mr. Varcoe intimated, by a series of unmistakable hints and signs, that any repetition of this unseemly conduct would be regarded by him with the utmost disfavour.

### CHAPTER IX. WRITING TO THE POINT

- (1) Think of the way from your house to your place of work—school, office, or whatever it may be. How would you tell a stranger, in a letter, how to get from one to the other?
- (2) Put down, in clear grammatical sentences, either (a) A cooking recipe, or (b) How to tie a knot, or (c) What you do when you change your clothes. In each case your account must be clear enough for anyone who knew nothing about any of the processes to follow it.

### CHAPTER X. THE "MOT JUSTE"

- (1) Try to think of as many nicknames as you can which really *describe* the person they are applied to. Put down on paper why they are good nicknames.
- (2) Think of a short sentence, spoken by anyone you know, which summed up a situation or wittily described an occasion.
- (3) Can you remember any other "mot juste" of Mr. Churchill than those mentioned in this chapter?

### CHAPTER XI. WORDS IN THEIR ORDER

- (1) A foreign friend of mine, imagining that he was behaving badly at table, exclaimed, "This is now beastly that I am doing." Put this in ordinary English. Does the way he put it alter the sense, or only the sound?

## QUESTIONS

- (2) "I could not love thee, dear, so much,  
Lov'd I not honour more."  
If you put this in the usual form of everyday speech, do you think it sounds better? Worse? Clumsier? Neater? Or don't you notice much difference?
- (3) Look at any paragraph you admire, in a book you like, and decide why you admire it. Try changing the order of the words in a short sentence from it. Can you do this, without hurting the sense?

## CHAPTER XII. THE AUTHOR AND HIS READERS

- (1) Some authors say they never consider their readers at all. Can this be true? Doesn't the very fact of putting a thing into words mean that they are trying to communicate a meaning to some reader?
- (2) Do you think an author owes his readers any sort of duty? Let us suppose he has always written a certain kind of book, and his readers have learned to expect it of him, and so, when a new book by him is advertised, they order it as usual, and then find it is a quite different kind of book. Have they a right to complain?
- (3) Suppose you had to write a letter to an author whose books you like, telling him why you like them. What would you say?

## CHAPTER XIII. GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

- (1) Some people will tell you that you have no right to criticize the doing of a thing until you can do it as well yourself. Why is this nonsense? And what grain of truth is there in it?
- (2) Am I right, do you think, in the following chapters, in talking only about those forms of writing which I have practised myself?

## CHAPTERS XIV AND XV: SHORT STORIES

The questions on these chapters are long. They have to be, if they are to be of any use.

Here are ideas to be worked up into stories. Each is the basis



## ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

of a story—but all the work has yet to be done. I will suggest lines on which it might go.

- (1) The landlord of a little inn keeps a stuffed gamecock on the mantelpiece of the bar. It is brightly coloured, and has very brilliant eyes. From time to time strangers offer to buy it, but his wife always refuses. Things get very bad, the inn has to be sold, but still she will not let the stuffed cock go. At last it is discovered that the eyes are jewels of great value, enough to set the family on its feet again and buy a new business.

The idea is improbable, but it can be made into a good story. Three essential questions suggest themselves at once.

(1) Where did the landlord get the cock?

(2) Why would his wife not let him sell it?

(3) How did the jewels come to be in the cock's head?

Suppose we combine (1) and (3). If we put the inn in a port, then customers can come to it from everywhere. A sailor unable to pay his score might have given the landlord the cock. How did *he* get it? Where did it come from? Obviously, a country where cock-fighting was popular. What about the jewels? Jewels represent money in a very handy and portable form. Someone who had money, and wanted to be sure of smuggling it out with him? Why should he have to flee? Flee? Politics—sudden changes—possibility of foreseeing disaster. South America? President or other official of tiny republic? Revolution?

Takes out the cock's glass eyes and puts jewels in? Caught? Killed? Has other valuables, so that the cock is overlooked? Nonsense—if he had so odd an object with him, it would be pulled to bits by searchers. So he must have left it somewhere? Given it to someone to keep for him? Then he was killed, and so never reclaimed it? And the man he left it with didn't realize its value? And so it came into a sailor's hands, etc., etc.?

That is one probable line, to account for the jewels being where they were.

Next—why wouldn't the landlord's wife let him sell the cock? (That fact gives you the main characterization of

## QUESTIONS

the pair.) Did it seem to bring her luck once? When one of the children was ill? Or when she had money on a horse? Endless possibilities here.

Were chance customers in the habit of admiring and trying to buy it—so that refusal became a habit? One day, did a man offer her a couple of pounds for it? And come back a day or so later, and double his offer?

Was she finally offered ten or even twenty pounds for the cock? (i.e. by some dealer who had spotted that the eyes weren't glass). Was there a row between husband and wife over her refusal? (The refusal might easily have become a stock quarrel between them, so that she would refuse automatically, however great the offer, rather than give way on a cardinal point of dispute between her and her husband.)

Then, of course, the dealers would try to steal the bird? More adventures. Put in a safe? In the bank? Would they have a safe? Might they buy one on purpose—the wife insisting, the husband cursing? For very pride, they would have to keep the bird visible during business hours.

Then the crash. The husband ill. The wife at last weakened, anxious to sell the cock. No takers. Till, at last . . .

With the results they get a new inn, and call it—title of story—The Gamecock?

Do the story another way—in outline only. There are scores of ways.

For instance—the cock used to be in a country house. One of the maids was in love with a bad lot. He persuaded her to steal some jewels. She got two rings. The old housekeeper found out what she had done. The girl was a daughter of her best friend, and she had got her the place. So as not to disgrace her friend, she sewed the rings into the cock's head, planning to remove them in two or three months' time and let them be found in the garden, or somewhere.

But the strain is too much for her, and she dies of a heart attack. No one knows where the rings are, not even the girl who stole them. . . .

Now go on.

## ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

- (2) A young man in a moorland district owns a very fast and powerful motor-bicycle. The local policeman wants to catch him exceeding the speed limit.

The young man makes a regular journey as fast as he can, and his time begins to be a subject of bets in the village.

The policeman goes a long way up the road with a stop-watch, to time him and catch him: and arranges with a colleague to check the time a couple of miles further on.

Unfortunately for the policeman, the young man sees him. He goes past him all out, at a terrific pace. Once he is well out of sight, he stops, dismounts, and sits by the road for twenty minutes or so. Then he goes on, and passes policeman No. 2 at a terrific pace.

The first policeman is jubilant—until he compares times with his colleague, and finds that the young man has taken twenty-two minutes to travel two miles.

This idea is more complete than the other, but it still is far from being a story.

This time I will indicate the necessary questions more briefly.

What was the regular journey? How often was it made? (Groceries? Letters, on a Saturday, when the postman didn't make an afternoon delivery?)

Why was the policeman so anxious to catch the young man? (The village exulting in his feats, and making bets on his cutting a few seconds off his time? A girl? Something of both? Character of policeman important here—and of young man.)

Incident more like middle than end of story. How did the policeman take his humiliation? Did he try to catch the young man a second time? Did he succeed?

Was there ill-feeling against the policeman?

Suppose the young man had an accident—even killed himself? Suppose the policeman had been lurking near by, to catch him out again? Would the villagers connect him with the accident? (Hissed in the street after the inquest. The young man's mother cursing him. Etc., etc.)

What about the girl? Would she try to revenge her lover's death?

How did the matter end?

## QUESTIONS

- (3) A girl is going home from her work in the city. She is standing at a bus stop, waiting for a bus. A young man—a total stranger—runs up to her breathlessly, and puts a small attaché case in her hands.

“You live in So-and-So Road, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Will you please call in at No. 144, and give this to Mrs. Lister? Please. It’s a matter of life and death.”

And he is gone.

You can develop this in fifty ways. If you favour a romantic line, I suggest that, when the girl reaches the house, the old lady welcomes her as if she knew her, and brings her into a room, where the girl is thunderstruck to see a pastel portrait of herself on the piano.

How come?—as the film people say.

- (4) Here are one or two ideas. I leave the lines of development to you.

A man poisons another man, who takes a great deal of salt with his food, by substituting a poisoned salt cellar for a harmless one in a small Soho restaurant.

Grand possibilities here. What was the row? How was the substitution done? Were any other customers of the restaurant affected? How was the murderer spotted?

## CHAPTERS XVI AND XVII: MAKING A FILM

- (1) You are writing a film script. The following information has to be conveyed to the audience as quickly as possible:

“There was once a burglar who committed a particularly daring series of burglaries. At last the police caught him, and he was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. After serving a part of this term, the burglar escaped. There was a tremendous hue and cry, and, because the police were so anxious to recapture him, they offered a large reward for any information which would lead to his capture.

“The escaped burglar had to lie hid, because his prison clothes would betray him if he were seen. For a time he hid in a clump of tall rushes near a river. He would soon have had to give himself up, but for a stroke of pure luck. A clergyman, coming to the river, noticed the excellent screen

## ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE

afforded by the rushes, and decided to have a bathe. When he came out, his clothes were gone. The enterprising burglar had seen his chance and taken it. The police have now to look out for their prisoner disguised as a clergyman."

That was the problem confronting Charlie Chaplin at the opening of his film *The Pilgrim*. He solved it in a very few *silent* shots. How many could you do it in? After you have tried, turn to page 178, and see how he did it.

Notice the astonishing economy of that—and the way in which it makes the audience use their wits. Charlie Chaplin explained nothing, made no connexion between those four shots. That is film. That is cinema. The cinema audience, like a child, says, "Let me see. Let me see." And sight is very quick.

- (2) In the same film, Charlie, in his disguise as a clergyman, has conducted a service and has to receive the collecting-boxes. There are two big collecting-boxes, one for each side of the church. Charlie wants to tell us that one side has put in more money than the other.

How would you do that? Would you show the hands putting the coins in—big coins on one side, small on the other? Would you show the faces of the two men taking the collection, one getting longer and longer, as he realizes that his side isn't putting in enough, the other getting happier and happier as he realizes that his side is winning? Or how would you do it?

Turn to page 178, and see how Charlie did it.

## CHAPTER XVIII. STORIES AND PLAYS

- (1) "The telephone is a boon to the lazy playwright." Think out a situation where a character on the stage can give the audience necessary information by a conversation on the telephone.
- (2) At the start of a certain one-act play, the audience has to know that a couple have come to a cottage for their honeymoon, and that the bride has been drowned that morning while she was bathing, that her husband made vain attempts to rescue her, and has since disappeared. What

## QUESTIONS

is the most natural way of conveying that information to them?

- (3) "A story tells what happened then. A play shows what is happening now." How is this true? And what practical difference does it make?

## CHAPTER XIX. WRITING AN ESSAY

- (1) Someone tells you to write an essay on "Oilcloth." Think of four different ways in which you could approach the subject—according to whether you decided to give (a) practical information, (b) history, (c) personal opinions and feelings, (d) amusement.
- (2) "He wrote round the subject, not about it." Does this suggest anything to you? If so, what? Would it apply to any of the approaches to "Oilcloth" in the first question? If so, to which, and why?
- (3) Do you like best an essay which (a) sets out the arguments for and against a judgement without coming to a conclusion? (b) takes one side only? (c) gives information? (d) is used by the writer to say whatever comes into his head? (e) chases its own tail?

What sort of essay chases its own tail?

## CHAPTER XX. DO YOU LIKE POETRY

- (1) "The meaning of a poem is its effect upon each reader." Do you agree?
- (2) Are you embarrassed by hearing poetry spoken or read aloud? If so, why? If only occasionally, on what sort of occasion? Or by what sort of speaker?
- (3) Does the music of a poem mean more to you, or the sense: i.e., what the poem seems to be about?
- (4) Do you think boys and girls should, or should not, be made to learn poems by heart? If so, should the poems be their choice, or the teacher's?

## CHAPTER XXI. HOW WE SPEAK

No questions.

## APPENDIX

### CHAPTER V

This is not really a snobbish question, though it could become one. Each mistake here is a breach of the accepted rules of the game of grammar—the way English people have agreed to write.

One should know the rules, and be able to keep them, even if one does not trouble about them on one's own account.

### CHAPTERS XVI AND XVII

(1) The four shots were:

- (i) A close-up of a poster showing a portrait of Charlie in prison dress and a big reward offered for his capture.
- (ii) A river bank, with tall rushes, and a man starting to bathe.
- (iii) The man coming out of the water, and looking in dismay for his clothes.
- (iv) Charlie, dressed as a parson, walking along a railway station platform.

(2) The two collectors bring Charlie their boxes. Charlie takes one box in each hand, and weighs them one against the other. One is heavy: he bows and smiles to the side it comes from. The other is light. He shakes his head and scowls at the side it comes from.









